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The role of local government to facilitate and spearhead sustainable tourism development

Abstract

The role and standard of tourism development for the society needs to be sustainable. The government at all levels has the obligation to ensuring that the plight of the poor is addressed and turned around through sustainable tourism development. This paper is conceptual and discusses tourism sustainable development while illuminating a significant role that a local government should play irrespective of difficulties that some governments face when trying to achieve intended objectives. As a result concerns from different circles have been raised about how effective governments have been in integrating sustainability principles and practices within tourism planning policies and processes in order for tourism to achieve sustainable development. Sustainable development of tourism must follow three principles, namely: fairness principle, sustainability principles, and community principle, on which the sustainable development of the local government systems relies on to build and enhance positivity and prosperity to communities through tourism.

Keywords: sustainable development, governance, state interventions, local government, service sectors.
JEL Classification: 010.

Introduction

Ruhanen (2013) argues that governments at all levels have assumed greater responsibility for, and involvement in, tourism destination planning and sustainable development. He further suggests that governments have tended to adopt a more interventionist approach to tourism relative to other service sectors. Initially this stemmed from an ardent interest in tourism's economic returns, and it was justified in terms of capitalizing on the taxes paid by businesses and visitors and of the employment opportunities created. Certainly the government involvements and direction in addressing or attempting to meet the objectives of sustainable development in a tourism destination context are widely supported (Weaver, 2006). Further, concerns have been raised about how effective governments have been in integrating sustainability principles and practices within tourism planning policies and processes (Connell, Page, & Bentley, 2009; Hall, 2007). A primary challenge for local governance both today and in decades ahead, is to steer increasingly external, global forces on local development so that development achieves the shared vision of the local population. In cities, towns and villages throughout the world, the primary responsibility for this steering process rests with the institution of local government and its diverse local authorities. Sustainable development has recently emerged as a key issue in the development agenda for the tourism industry in many developing countries (Helmey, 2004). So because of the above assertion this study has been informed by few objectives such as disclosing and examining what and how do local governments in particular succeed in ensuring that the development agenda of empowering local residents through sustainable tourism is practically achieved. It is also one of the objectives of the study to ascertain challenges that many governments face when trying to empower and emancipate residents through sustainable tourism development. Seeking sustainable tourism development in order to achieve the best balance between the economic benefits and the social and environmental impacts is nowadays a challenge to many governments in the world (Mckercher, 2003). Sustainable tourism may have different definitions depending on the unit of analysis considered and the aspects emphasized from the multitude of dimensions involved with the concept (Dinica, 2009). Sustainable tourism is not a discrete or special form of tourism; all forms of tourism should strive to be sustainable. The concept of sustainable development has become widely accepted as the way to a better future, preoccupation for planning practitioners, policy-makers, and an area of growing research interests among academics (Brokaj, 2014). While the contribution of this study in terms of literature is immense in sharing what local governments should do to spearhead sustainable development through tourism, it also reflects an emblematic ideas regarding the principles of sustainable development that need to be taken into cognizance for its objectives to be assured and achieved. Overall, there is only limited literature that explores the role of local governments to facilitate and spearhead sustainable tourism development especially in developing countries (Yuksel et al., 2005). In most cases governments tend to have numerous and promising policies and plans for sustainable tourism development which unfortunately do not yield good results because of deficiencies and shortcomings on execution and implementation.

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1. Local governance and sustainable tourism

Buttler (2010) suggests that destinations wanting to promote sustainable tourism are more likely to be successful when there is effective local governance. Normally this involves having good mechanisms for the coordination of collective action. But in practice there are substantial difficulties that can hinder effective governance for sustainable tourism. One reason why more studies of governance in this context are needed is to understand these difficulties and also, importantly, to find potential ways to overcome them (Hall, 2008). One difficulty for the governance of sustainable tourism is that its concern cuts across sectors and spans diverse policy domains, such as planning, transport, climate change, employment and regional development. Sustainable tourism policies need to be integrated with wider economic, social and environmental policy considerations within an overall sustainable development framework. According to Yuksel et al. (2005) the policies affecting sustainable tourism are very often made in policy domains other than tourism, often with little attention paid to the implications for tourism. These characteristics of sustainable tourism governance mean that it is very difficult to secure a coordinated approach. There is also obstacle to securing coordination within the tourism sector itself. William (2004) suggests that the institutional setting for tourism policy is particularly weak due to fragmentation in the industry and weak interest group representation.

2. The role and responsibility of local government

Little attention has been given to purposefully investigate the roles and responsibilities of local government in addressing sustainable development within tourism destination context (Dinica, 2009; Wray, 2009; Beaumont & Dredge, 2010). Governments nevertheless have a critical role in creating the context and stimulation actions to ensure that tourism is more developmental and sustainable in order to empower residents.

Local government has become an important arena for discussions about the interpretation and implementation of sustainable development (Commonwealth department of environment and heritage 2004: UNEP 2003). Certainly, there was considerable agreement that local government should have some role in setting the strategic direction for tourism within a destination (Hardy & Beeton, 2001; Liu, 2003; Weaver, 2006). Governments nevertheless have a crucial role in creating the context and stimulating actions to ensure that tourism is more sustainable in the future (Brokaj, 2014). Bramwell & Lane (2011) suggest that local governments have a role in facilitating and spearheading sustainable tourism development. Regional Councils set out strategic issues that affect natural and physical resources and produce a guiding framework for policies within their respective regions. However, it is Territorial Local Authorities (TLAs) that take the prime responsibility for planning at the local level, and for tourism developers the local council is usually the first point of contact with the planning system (Connell et al., 2009). The role of local government is that of driving sustainable development agenda within the destination. Governments should provide an environment that enables and encourages the private sector, local community, tourists and other stakeholders to respond to sustainability issues. This can be best achieved by management, drawn up in concert with others. Local government has responsibility for land-use planning, development applications for tourism-related land uses, and the provision of local infrastructure and public amenities (Hall, 2000). Indeed the provision and maintenance of infrastructure and facilities by local governments can have a significant influence on the image and attractiveness of a destination, the depth and diversity of the available product, and ultimately, on how tourists experience a destination (Dredge, 2001).

3. The influence of local government

Hardy and Beeton (2001) argue that the role of the government should be to drive sustainable tourism development within their destination. It should set the strategic direction for tourism within a destination. In practice, the local government is often working following the framework of the national state and it's often a primary influence on governance, including policymaking for sustainable development (Newman & Clark, 2009). This is an important reason why more research is needed on the roles and activities of local government that affect tourism and sustainability in destinations. Without government interventions, the objectives of sustainable tourism may be reliant on voluntary actions or self-regulation, and not all sectors will respond positively. Bramwell & Lane (2000) argue that actors may fail to respond to voluntary initiatives because of disinterest, objecting to the initiatives or because of taking the required steps that involve various costs. Many researchers suggest that over the last 30 years, the state or government in many countries has often become of a less significant influence. The political direction has moved so that the state's activities increasingly occur through arm's length relationships, with a growing role for agencies, public-private sector partnerships, the voluntary sector, and markets and quasi-markets. The representative politics of government has also had a shrinking hold on public trust and engagement, and it has been supplemented by a greater use of public forums and

consultation. The state's continuing influence can occur, for example, through subtle government steering of the priorities for action of the new agencies and partnerships (Flynn, 2002; & Jessop, 2008). Such steering by the state might be achieved through its use of detailed contracts, competition for funding, performance indicators, audits and reviews (Kokx & van Kempen, 2010).

4. Local government power

The central government also allows local authorities to engage and design specific plans and regulations, based on the national framework, that relate to tourism development in their local area (Bokaj, 2014). Certainly, the complexities of stakeholder power have been identified as problematic in the sustainable tourism literature to date (Beritelli & Laesser, 2011; Bramwell, 2004; Hall, 2008; Moscardo, 2011; Pforr, 2004; Wesley & Pforr, 2010). Arguably, power is a significant inhibitor to sustainability and an issue worthy of more systematic investigation in future research. For example, a case study by Wesley and Pforr (2010) found that tourism development decision-making is inherently political, with needs, demands, values, interests, ideologies and power arrangements interacting and shaping the decision-making process and the contributions to sustainability. The Local Government Act of 1974 in 2002 explains clearly about what local governments should do to assist local communities in order to benefit from local activities. The act also clarifies on the increased flexibility of local government in decision-making and empowering local community in democratic processes, and gave more power to Regional Councils to pursue sustainable development objectives. Tourism since 2001, changes in planning law and subsequent measures by local government to engage further in tourism (Connell et al., 2009). Further, local governments are the elected representatives of local residents, and as such they have a mandate to represent the interests of the wider destination community.

5. Partnerships

The role of local authorities as facilitation in the development process is reinforced through municipal international cooperation (MIC). With globalization, the governance challenges facing local authorities in different parts of the world have increased in their similarities, transcending the national, political and economic systems upon which different communities rely. The shared challenges of governance have instigated thousands of local authorities to establish municipal international cooperation projects and to join international local government organizations to advocate for local self-governance and control over the development process (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives ICLEI). Although collaboration was widely endorsed (Choi & Murray, 2010), there was no legislative basis that stipulated this must actually occur. Indeed, previous studies have shown that government have generally not incorporated public participation into tourism planning processes successfully, and that public involvement can be more accurately described as a form of tokenism in which decisions, or the direction of decisions, have already been prescribed by government (Hall, 2000). Therefore, while theoretically the notion of collaboration and engagement might be supported in policy documents, local governments can use representative loopholes to avoid widespread consultation and public participation (Ruhanen, 2009). The renewed focus on governance in tourism destination contexts (Dredge & Whitford, 2011) can go some way towards addressing these deficiencies, although arguably many of the typical impediments such as power and control still remain (Moscardo, 2011).

6. Local government challenges and sustainability

The reasons for and challenges associated with local government involvement and direction in addressing the objectives of sustainable development in a tourism destination context are numerous. For instance, it is at the local community level where tourism's negative influences are generally felt most acutely (Aronsson, 2000), and so the actions (or inactions) of local government can play a large part in ensuring overt environmental degradation is avoided and adverse impacts on the host community are minimized. Local governments are faced with an array of challenges to the effective planning and management of tourism at their destination level. The most common challenge is that of integrating management of tourism with other functions and activities of local government. According to Berke (2002) governments at all levels unquestionably have been central in driving, or the least supporting, the sustainable tourism development agenda. As a result, globally the quantity of policy statements, strategies, guidelines and initiatives from national, regional and local governments underpinned by sustainable development has grown exponentially. While legitimately underpinning tourism policy with sustainable development objectives has been identified as a problem, governments also received further criticism for their limited adoption of the principles in planning practice. As noted, planning based on the principles of sustainable development requires a strategic orientation and multiple stakeholder participation in the planning process (Simpson, 2001). The challenge for local governments at all levels is that they are encouraged

to grow tourism as a means of economic development and growth, and so the policies pursued are most suited to the interests of the economy and the commercial sector of the tourism industry (Bramwell, 2004). Local governments have a challenging role in facilitating sustainable tourism development due to a general lack of understanding by government of the principles underlying sustainable tourism development (Bramwell & Lane, 2011). Briedenhann (2007) has also noted that the supportive, rather than regulatory, nature of public sector policy is a continuing challenge.

7. Sustainable tourism planning

Sustainable tourism development requires a process of planning and management that brings together the interests and concerns of a diverse group of stakeholders in a sustainable and strategic way (UNEP, 2003). Dwyer et al. (2008) suggest that tourism not properly planned and managed can leave permanent footprints on the physical, social, cultural and economic environments of destinations. Bushell et al. (2003) argue that governments at all levels and stakeholders in the tourism sector have a responsibility to ensure that the development of tourism long-term prosperity and the quality of life for future generations are not placed at risk. The complexities of sustainable tourism development demand a planning approach which is multidimensional and purposely integrated. To substantiate the above Dwyer et al. (2008) suggest that tourism planning requires an understanding of the meaning of sustainable development and the guiding values for promoting sustainable tourism. It requires that communities should be made sufficiently aware of the tourism industry and enabled to understand its impacts, as well as the various processes to integrate and engage in participatory planning, consensus building and conflict resolution among all stakeholders.

Conclusions

This article presents an analysis of the role and challenges of local government when facilitating sustainable tourism development in the developing world. It was found that the factors that have emerged as challenges to sustainable tourism development related to priorities of national economic policy, the structure of public administration, and emergence of environmental issues over commercialization, and the structure of international tourism system. It concludes that although the principles of sustainable tourism development are beneficial, their implementation is an enormously difficult task to achieve and owing to the prevailing socio-economic and political conditions in the developing world. Hence, any operation of principles of sustainable tourism development necessitates hard political and economic choices, and decisions based upon complex socio-economic and environmental trade-offs. Moreover, it states that implementation of these hard decisions may not be possible unless international organizations encourage and collaborate with governments of developing countries to implement the principles of sustainable tourism development. Although arguments regarding the challenges to sustainable tourism development have been raised with special reference to the developing world, they may be valid for many developing countries that have adopted a similar tourism development approach and experienced similar difficulties. Hence, it may be possible to draw several general conclusions.

For instance, many local governments in developing countries have chronic and severe macro-economic problems such as high rates of unemployment, rapid growth of the semi-skilled and unskilled working-age population and high rate of inflation and interest. In the short term many developing countries do not have alternatives to tourism to find sources of foreign currency earnings and to create jobs for the rapidly growing population. Thus, developing world governments do not have much option other than to support current tourism development even though it may not be compatible with the principles of long-term sustainable development. Sustainability as a long-term objective can only have relevance if it can gather the support of present day beneficiaries.

Governments more broadly, and local governments specifically, have been criticized for their shortcomings in terms of addressing sustainable tourism development. Many authors have discussed what the role of local government should be, but few have directly investigated local governments' roles, responsibilities and challenges in facilitating or inhibiting sustainable tourism development (Ruhanen, 2012). The local government is aware of sustainable tourism principles, but they find hard to accommodate them in practice. Additionally, not all the stakeholders have a good understanding of what is required to develop successful tourism. Local government has assumed responsibility for driving the sustainable tourism agenda. But the roles and responsibilities of local government in working towards sustainable tourism have not been well defined, and that these have been confounded by issues surrounding the practical implementation of the concept. They often pursue policies focused on economic growth, improvement of the economic well-being of residents, job creation and infrastructure improvement, rather than emphasizing environmental management (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, ICLEI).

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