



Management by boundaries – Insights into the role of boundary objects in a community-based tourism development project

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H I G H L I G H T S

- Boundary objects provide a suitable theoretical tool to analyse CBT processes.
- Different knowledge communities should be acknowledged in CBT development projects.
- A successful boundary object generates feelings of ownership in development work.
- A “boundary object map” is a practical tool for managing CBT development projects.

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A B S T R A C T

Community-based tourism development typically assumes co-operation between different stakeholder groups at the local level, and thus combines different types of knowledge. However, this does not imply that a consensus exists between the stakeholders in the first place. In this article, we present a potential conceptual tool, namely boundary objects that could support stakeholders from different knowledge communities in working jointly towards a common goal and generate commitment towards it. The literature concerning knowledge communities and boundary objects is used as a theoretical framework. A three-year community-based tourism development project comprises the data of the article, and is used as a case study to illustrate the role of different knowledge communities, and to analyse the selected boundary objects. The results illustrate the importance of proper design of boundary objects in community-based tourism development processes, and highlight the features of a successful boundary object in generating ownership feelings towards development activities.

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1. Introduction

All too often the efforts of tourism development projects go awry, and they tend to end up with weak results, as the new operation models or innovative tourism products developed are not adopted and supported by local people, and the results are not sustainable. It is little wonder, then, that support from local community members is suggested to be one of the most important success factors in tourism development (e.g. Harrill, 2004; Simpson, 2001; Wilson, Fesenmaier, Fesenmaier, & Van Es, 2001). The concept of community-based tourism (CBT) has often considered an alternative to more traditional firm-based, top-down

tourism development, as it aims explicitly to support community commitment. The importance of community involvement in tourism development processes has also been acknowledged in the sustainable tourism discourse in the context of social sustainability (e.g. Choi & Sirakaya, 2006; Saarinen, 2006).

According to Russell (2000), community-based tourism should fulfil the following three criteria: (1) it should have the support and participation of local people; (2) maximal economic benefit should go to the people living in or near the destination and (3) tourism must protect local people's cultural identity and the natural environment. Thus, community-based tourism aims to benefit members of local communities through sustainable capacity building and empowering them as a means to achieve community development objectives (Okazaki, 2008; Tolkach, King, & Pearlman, 2013). It assumes from the outset that when decisions regarding tourism are made and executed locally, local people are also more

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likely to take ownership of the tourism development (see Hiwasaki, 2006; Simpson, 2008). Additionally, the benefits are concentrated locally (Kontogeorgopoulos, Churyenb, & Duangsangb, 2014).

Critical voices point out the challenges associated with community-based tourism such as different objectives for community-based tourism among the stakeholders; asymmetrical power relations, limited economic success and dependence on long-term external support (e.g. Van Der Duim & Caalders, 2008; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009; Sharpley, 2000; Tolkach & King, 2015; Weaver, 1998). In addition, previous literature has highlighted the need for appropriate methods and tools to enable meaningful participation of locals in the tourism development processes (e.g. Gascón, 2013; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Regardless of its weaknesses, community-based tourism has still been widely suggested as a potential way to deliver economic and social regeneration, while protecting local cultures against the rising tide of globalisation in the broader context of the tourism industry (Murphy, 1985).

If communities try to implement the development processes solely by themselves, Tolkach and King (2015) state that community-based tourism development often faces a lack of tourism skills and knowledge among local residents as well as limited support for development. Establishing a wide collaborative network, instead, can offer the prospect of addressing these challenges of training, promotion and advocacy, as well as support the development of tourism and help local enterprises confront the challenges of insufficient knowledge, funding and marketing (Besser, 1999). For these reasons, community-based tourism is typically founded on the idea of wide collaboration practices. According to Gray (1989), collaboration refers to a process of joint decision-making among key stakeholders either to resolve planning problems or to manage issues related to planning and development. Collaboration and aiming to build a consensus on tourism development policies has many potential benefits for different groups, and the measures involved potentially help to restrain the cost of resolving conflicts and give a voice to local people. Most importantly, joint development processes also promote a sense of shared ownership among stakeholder groups (e.g. Bramwell & Sharman, 1999). Joint decision making, however, does not imply a consensus between the stakeholders in the first place.

Studying stakeholder groups and their intersecting interests has been a recurring theme in tourism management literature (e.g. Byrd, 2007; Byrd, Bosley, & Dronberger, 2009; Khazaei, Elliot, & Joppe, 2015; Robson & Robson, 1996; Sautter & Leisen, 1999; Waligo, Clarke, & Hawkins, 2013). In addition, participatory or collaborative planning aiming to include the stakeholders to the planning processes has drawn a lot of attention (e.g. Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002; Timothy & Tosun, 2003; Tosun, 2000) as well as the collaboration within the tourism sector in general has been analysed from several theoretical frameworks such as inter-organisational learning (e.g. Bramwell & Sharman, 1999), actor-network theory (e.g. Arnaboldi & Spiller, 2011; Jóhannesson, 2005; Paget, Dimanche, & Mounet, 2010; Pavlovich, 2003) and cross-organisational collaboration (e.g. Akoumianakis, 2014). A growing number of tourism researchers are interested also in issues that fall under the rubric of innovation research (e.g. Hjalager, 1997, 2002, 2010; Carlisle, Kunc, Jones, & Tiffin, 2013; Nieves & Segarra-Ciprés, 2015). In particular, innovation research raises essential questions concerning knowledge dynamics and learning within various stakeholder groups. In fact, the traditional stakeholder approach typically focuses on the understanding the stakeholders or their management in relation to the business or a topic on hands, and studies on interaction between the different stakeholder groups is still rare (Neville & Menguc, 2006). Common critique towards collaborative or participatory approaches, on the other hand, has pointed out need to put more emphasis on the facilitation

of the process, acknowledging better the power relationships and emotional tensions between the stakeholder groups and enabling the participation in a meaningful way for different stakeholder groups (Reed, 2008). Also Tolkach and King (2015) emphasise the need to accommodate sufficient flexibility in the community-based tourism to empower the membership, and sufficient integration in collaboration processes to allow for the development of common goals. More research has been called for on practical-level implications, that is, on how to combine all of these stakeholder interests and knowledge types in such a manner that the common goal can be attained (Bramwell & Sharman, 1999).

Among organization and management theorists, the concept of “boundary object” has sparked considerable interest as a potential conceptual tool for understanding co-operation between various groups. Boundary objects have been defined as the “sort of arrangements that allow different groups to work together without a consensus” (Star, 2010, p. 602). The concept of boundary object is strongly linked to the social approach to knowledge and learning (Star & Griesemer, 1989), and it has recognised knowledge and learning as something that is produced in social interactions between various communities of mutual learning and knowledge creation, or to put it more simply, knowledge communities (Hafkesbrink & Schroll, 2011; Thomas, Hardy, & Sargent, 2007). In practice, boundary objects provide conditions that allow different groups to exchange knowledge and enhance collective learning, so that each group finds a feasible role in relation to the boundary object, and the boundary object helps them to interpret the knowledge of other groups to apply to the common goal. Boundary objects can be, for example, jointly agreed tasks, physical artefacts or discussion forums.

Boundary objects are attractive to management theorists because they act as mediating artefacts that have interpretive flexibility, and can be an important means of achieving collaboration and promoting the sharing of knowledge between diverse groups and communities (Sapsed & Salter, 2004; Thomas et al., 2007). No wonder the concept has been utilized across a wide range of fields of research from knowledge and information management (e.g. Carlile, 2002; Carlile, 2004; Kimble, Grenier, & Goglio-Primard, 2010), knowledge integration (e.g. Abson et al., 2014; Cash et al., 2003) and science-stakeholder integration (e.g. Döring & Ratter, 2016) to innovation management (e.g. Swan, Bresnen, Newell, & Robertson, 2007), strategic management (e.g. Spee & Jarzabkowski, 2009) and project management (Barret & Oborn, 2010; Koskinen & Mäkinen, 2009; Sapsed & Salter, 2004; Yakura, 2002). It has been used as a framework for analyzing, for instance, care management (Allen, 2009) and natural resource management (e.g. Clark et al., 2016; White et al., 2010). Research into tourism and hospitality management has also acknowledged boundary objects and their role in affording a sense of togetherness when developing innovative tourism services and products (e.g. Akoumianakis, 2014). However, this branch of study is still rare.

Our study contributes to community-based tourism research by enhancing the understanding of how to involve different types of stakeholders in the community-based tourism development. This will be achieved by examining a community-based tourism development process through the theoretical framework of knowledge communities and boundary objects. We aim to expand the understanding of how various actors can co-operate despite having different knowledge bases and sometimes even conflicting interests. Our research question is how boundary objects enable or constrain the collaboration between stakeholders representing different knowledge communities. Our main argument is that the development of community-based tourism necessitates a conscious deliberation over the boundary objects and the active management of them. Our research data is based on a case study of

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