



Strengthening Community-Based Tourism in a new resource-based island nation: Why and how?



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Stakeholder perceptions of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) networks are analysed.
- CBT networks represent a viable rural development strategy in the developing world.
- Source of funding, leadership and power balance are among the major success factors.
- In resource-rich nations implementation is likely to depend on the government.
- Despite representing social economy, a CBT network may prolong neo-colonialism.

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ABSTRACT

A manifestation of early destination development, Community-Based Tourism (CBT) enterprises have been emerging across Timor-Leste as a rural development strategy. In the context of this fledgling and oil revenue dependent nation, CBT enterprises will need to overcome various challenges if they are to fulfil their potential. The present paper explores stakeholder perceptions towards the prospective shape and structure of a nationwide CBT network using a multi-stage qualitative research approach. Respondents broadly agreed that a CBT network can support the development of tourism and help enterprises to confront the challenges of deficient knowledge, funding and marketing, prospectively improving rural livelihoods. The researchers consider neo-colonial, social economy and community development perspectives when applying the prospective CBT model in a resource dependent developing country setting. The success of a CBT network relies on an authoritative funding body and on communications between managers and stakeholders that maintains a balance of power.

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1. Introduction

Various scholars have identified Community-Based Tourism (CBT) as a suitable development model for maximising the socio-economic benefits of tourism and minimising negative environmental impacts (Moscardo, 2008; Ruiz-Ballesteros & Hernández-Ramírez, 2010). Advocates have argued that a networked, collaborative approach to CBT offers better prospects for delivering effective and sustainable tourism development (APEC Tourism Working Group and STCRC, 2010; Stronza, 2008). However, others have criticised such initiatives for their lack of profitability, inadequate

contributions to community development and weak marketing and distribution (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Blackstock, 2005; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Those seeking evidence of genuinely sustainable tourism have attributed the slow progress to a failure by scholars and practitioners in demonstrating tangible economic, socio-cultural and environmental contributions (Liu, 2003; McKercher and Prideaux, 2014). Providing a comprehensive critique of sustainable tourism is outside the scope of the present paper. However the term refers to maximising the positive tourism impacts and minimising the negatives, thereby addressing the needs of hosts and guests without compromising the wellbeing of future generations and of the physical environment.

Most network studies have been undertaken in developed destinations (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Murphy, 1985; Murphy & Murphy, 2004; Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008). However, CBT networks have potential to assist the socio-economic development of less developed countries, especially in

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the case of Small Island Developing States (SIDS), where tourism is often associated with colonial and neo-colonial activities that contributed inadequately to local livelihoods (Britton, 1983; Gibson, 2010; Hollinshead, 2004; Mowforth & Munt, 2008). In resource-based developing country economies, where government revenues are the only benefit flowing from the resource (Ross, 2012), CBT networks may also provide an opportunity for rural development by strengthening fragile individual business operations. Advocates of the approach point to its potential for delivering community goals in the tourism and community development contexts (APEC Tourism Working Group and STCRC, 2010). Nevertheless, there has been little exploration of appropriate CBT network structures and functions in rural settings within less developed countries.

The present paper reports on stakeholder perceptions about the optimal structuring of a prospective CBT network in the recently independent oil-rich state of Timor-Leste. It examines organisational and managerial issues associated with developing a CBT network in the context of national development structures and processes. An overview of Timor-Leste is provided, followed by a review of the literature on CBT and networks. The proposed research method is then presented. Drawing from the respondent comments, the researchers then present the characteristics of the prospective CBT network model and its structure and functions. A proposed development process is presented for the establishment of a CBT network along with potential implementation challenges. The discussion and conclusion sections discuss the merits of a networking approach to advance the development of CBT, achieve broader development goals and reduce the negative impacts associated with a neo-liberal approach on less developed states.

2. The setting

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (aka East Timor) is one of the world's most recently established nations located on the eastern half of Timor Island, an hour's flight north of Darwin, Australia. West Timor is a province of Indonesia. Timor-Leste was under Portuguese administration from the sixteenth century until 1975, while West Timor was colonised by the Dutch, creating divisions between native people of Timor Island. In 1975 Timor-Leste declared its independence, which prompted an Indonesian invasion, a twenty four year occupation, and an estimated 183,000 casualties (CAVR, 2005). Timor-Leste gained independence from Indonesia in 1999, and was administered by the United Nations until 2002, when power was ceded to a locally elected government. This included reinstating the colonial border between East and West Timor, thereby complicating travel across two parts of a small island and the formation of island-wide networks. A decade after gaining independence, Timor-Leste is still forming its national identity (Brown, 2012).

It is ranked 134th out of 187 in the United Nations' Human Development Index (UNDP, 2014), which suggests basic living standards. Timor-Leste's total population was 1,066,409 in 2010 of whom 70% reside in rural areas (National Statistics Directorate and United Nations Population Fund, 2011). The economy is heavily oil dependent and revenues have been invested in a Petroleum Fund. Government spending has exploded since the earliest withdrawals from the Petroleum Fund in 2008, with the Petroleum Fund financing 85% (\$US1495 million) of the 2012 budget from (Ministerio das Finanças, 2011). Although most Timor-Leste residents are employed in agriculture and subsistence farming, they collectively account for only 26.5% of GDP (CIA, 2012). There is a risk that the economy will be lop-sided unless indigenous enterprise flourishes, especially outside the capital city.

Tourism has been identified as a development priority by government and by various international organisations. It offers the prospect of diversifying the economy, generating employment and fostering rural development (Timor-Leste Government, 2011; Timor-Leste Government, 2002). The Government has pursued a model of sustainable and socially responsible of tourism (Cabasset-Semedo, 2009), consistent with the prevailing United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) philosophy of sustainable tourism (UNWTO, 2004). Timor-Leste is suited to this approach since it combines rich offers a combination of environmental and cultural assets which have tourist appeal. As outlined in the national development plan there is also potential to draw upon oil revenues to fund sustainable tourism development as well as agriculture (Timor-Leste Government, 2011).

Timor-Leste's rich natural environment and culture give rise to various actual and potential tourist activities with snorkeling and diving being the most popular. Trekking is another adventure-based option. Timor-Leste's historical and cultural assets are also promoted, including its diverse cultural mix. The history of Portuguese colonisation and resistance to Indonesian occupation is an endemic Timor-Leste attraction (Dutta, 2012; Rose, 2012; Tourism Timor-Leste, 2012a). Fig. 1 outlines the major attractions (clockwise from top-left corner): Jaco beach at Tutuala, *uma lulik* – traditional sacred houses, Portuguese fort in Balibo, Museum of Timorese Resistance in Dili (photographs courtesy of the authors). The existence of the various tourism assets suggests that tourism has the potential to counterbalance the resource sector. However an economy that is dominated by oil extraction companies may be antipathetic to small scale social enterprises. Such enterprises will need a supportive environment offering economies of scale if they are to prosper.

The latest government statistics indicate that Timor-Leste received 26,714 visitor arrivals in 2009 with growth of 41.3% per cent reported from 2008 (Ministry of Tourism, Trade and Industry, 2011). The only more recent official statistics are from UNWTO (2014), which report that Timor-Leste received 55,000 international visitors in 2012 and 78,000 in 2013. Tourism receipts in both 2011 and 2012 were \$US 21,000,000 (UNWTO, 2014). These figures suggest that the average tourist generates \$US 382. The accommodation sector ranges from backpacker hostels priced at \$US10 per night to luxury resorts charging \$US145 (Tourism Timor-Leste, 2012a, 2012b). Unfortunately, the only available information is limited and sometimes contradictory. With tourism being in the early stages of development, it is unrealistic to rely exclusively on time series data for forecasting purposes.

Most community-based tourism in Timor-Leste involves accommodation located outside the national capital (Dili). Several CBT approaches have been adopted in different settings. The first 'eco-lodge' in the CBT category has been managed by a local Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) on the small island of Atauro since 2002. The enterprise was established before the country received its first oil revenues and provided an alternative to the various larger scale tourism ventures which were then being considered. The NGO was alarmed at the prospective impact of large tourism projects on traditional local lifestyles and preferred smaller-scale CBT. The NGO subsequently invested its profits in local community kindergarten and library projects as a means of showing the benefits of CBT to local residents (Pedi, 2007).

In another case, a national environmental NGO supported the development of three CBT accommodation establishments that operate as co-operatives in various villages. The choice of CBT over alternative options has strong ideological overtones. This approach provided incomes for villagers, while empowering them to exert control over community developments, and prevent environmental degradation (Carvalho, Cruz, Vieira, & Samson, 2008). Since

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