

Role of Alternative Tourism in Sustainable Rural Development

Introduction

Tourism is one of the largest industries, making a significant contribution to socio-economic development in developing countries. Although, the contribution of conventional mass tourism to rural socio-economic development in these countries is relatively small, rural tourism has been recognised (Frochot, 2005) as an alternative livelihood that could contribute significantly to sustainable rural development. The rural tourism conceptualises that countryside tangible and intangible resources such as pre-history, history, socio-culture, other anthropogenic aspects, traditional livelihood, and unspoiled atmosphere in the environment enable the rural communities to find their own capital. Further, the diversity of rural tourism generates many opportunities for micro and small entrepreneurs while providing exotic and contented holidays for the tourists. The significance of contribution of rural tourism to local economy has been well documented (Fleischer and Pizam, 1997; Page and Getz, 1997; OECD, 1994). However, the development of rural tourism should be in line with the existing ecosystem and rural resources. Eventually, rural tourism should ensure preservation and conservation of socio-culture, environment and economy while overcoming the existing developmental problems. As the majority of Sri Lankan population is in rural areas, well-planned and designed tourism would contribute significantly to rural development in a sustainable manner.

Tourism in the Development Process

Although tourism had been a social activity contributing to human well-being, today, it has been accepted as a major strategy for developing both socio-economy and environment. As an industry, tourism consists of a large number of enterprises and generates millions of employments (UNWTO, 2011), and contributes to government revenue, foreign exchange earning and income multiplier effects of different sectoral participation and income redistribution within the country. Thus, tourism helps to unite and integrate the communities, expand knowledge, revalue socio-culture, and appreciate and acknowledge the environment. Specifically, tourism has been recognised as a viable means of economic development in developing countries due to their poor physical and monetary resource availability. Moreover, the impacts of global warming and climate change could be mitigated through tourism industry with its value maximisation on green paradigm and environment-friendly concepts. However, the existing conventional mass tourism has failed to achieve sustainable development goals due to negative impacts, such as foreign exchange leakage, poor local community participation, lack of preservation and conservation of socio-culture and environment, etc. Consequently, conventional mass tourism is being replaced with alternative sustainable tourism (Mouforth and Munt, 1998; Sharma, 2000) named as ecotourism, rural tourism, agro-tourism, geo-

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tourism, community-based tourism, cultural tourism, indigenous tourism, etc. Many of these tourisms are possible only in rural areas, where sustainable development is an inevitable requirement.

Improving Sustainability in Marginalised Rural Areas

Whether in rural or urban setting, ensuring sustainability is the central issue in development. Sustainable development entails economic development while preserving the socio-culture and environment. Resuscitation of the declining socio-economies in rural areas is common challenge (Ying and Zhou, 2007) for both developed (Dernoi, 1991; Hannigan, 1994; Pompl and Lavery, 1993; Williams and Shaw, 1991) and developing countries (Kinsley, 2000). Although, contemporary development approaches enable the urban community to improve the quality of life up to some extent, it is not so in rural sector. Communities in rural and peripheral areas face challenges for continuous economic development due to the collapse of primary and traditional industries (McDonald and Jolliffe, 2003), which have led to a vicious circle of economic decline and socio-economic problems (Sharpley 2002). Collapse of traditional livelihood and outmigration of the rural

community have made the situation worse. Gradually, the rural areas have largely been abandoned and ignored by the populace, even though rural agricultural communities and their residents were once perceived as the pioneers or 'bread and butter' of the country (Reichel *et al.*, 2000). Although, rural sector contributes immensely to overall socio-economic development in any country, today, the rapid decline of natural resources and degradation of socio-culture and environment have become alarming threats for sustainable development in rural areas.

Consequently, empowering local communities has become one of the most prioritised needs in rural areas for their sustainable development. Although many governmental and non-governmental socio-economic empowerment projects have been initiated, they have failed to achieve the development goals or resolve the prevailing socio-economic and environmental problems in rural areas. However, none of them has been successful or sustainable, though they have provided instant and temporary solutions for some problems related to their survival. They have been political salvation or social charity programmes. Further, as long as funding is available and benefits are generated, the projects display a success and community participation, but, when the funding is stopped, projects tend to be failed and discontinued. The implementation of the projects in top-down approach is the obvious reason for the failure, and hence, they are not consistent with the local resource setting and community perception. Consequently, poor socio-economic regeneration has led to poor capitalisation and entrepreneurial

development. Rural areas require their own capital and entrepreneurship development in line with the existing environment and resource availability to ensure the sustainability in the development of rural areas. Making use of local resources for alternative purposes would be inevitable to stimulate rural economies (Liu, 2005) and very important to create alternative sources of income to retain the economic vitality of the rural areas (Unwin, 1996) rather than providing concessionary packages or schemes. The capitalisation and entrepreneurial development process incorporated with the assessment of human and physical geography of rural areas, local resource identification and inventorisation of local community participation in decision making and development process together with an integrated vision for the rural region (Innoides, 1995) are essential to reach sustainable development goals in rural areas. Furthermore, re-conceptualisation of rural resources as countryside capital (Garrod, *et al.*, 2006) is a widely-accepted strategy in rural tourism development.

Countryside Capitalisation for Alternative Tourism

In alternative tourism, socio-culture, environment, historical and archaeological, anthropogenic and other human and physical geographical resources in rural areas are rediscovered as the capital for rural tourism industry. Meanwhile, other traditional industries, as the substituting source of livelihood, are unable to generate capital from the declining agriculture or other existing resources in the rural areas, nevertheless the rural communities thrive their traditional livelihood with them. Alternative tourism is considered as an engine

for rural economic growth (Hall and Jenkins, 1998); an effective catalyst of rural socio-economic development and regeneration (Sharpley, 2002); a complementary tool for socio-economic regeneration in rural areas (Briedenhann and Wickens, 2004; Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000; MacDonald and Jolliffe, 2003; Yinga and Zhou, 2007); a means to counteract economic decline and forestall outmigration by the indigenous population (Walford, 2001); a suitable form of economic development for rural areas; a tool to preserve the integrity of the countryside resource while enhancing the local economy and maintaining rural ways of life (Lane, 1994; Hall and Jenkins, 1998; Roberts and Hall, 2001; Garrod *et al.*, 2006); and use the existing resources to achieve new economic growth (Seaton 1996). Moreover, cultural values would be a resource for socio-economic development in rural and peripheral communities (McDonald and Jolliffe, 2003). Alternative tourism would be a strategy to regain and retain the socio-economy and environment of the rural areas. Thus, it could make a value addition on the existing resources such as countryside atmosphere, tradition and preserved socio-culture, anthropogenic resources, traditional livelihood and other human and natural geographical resources and improve the value chain of the rural tourism industry. Moreover, the rural tourism would empower the local community through their own capital and resources, while creating a competitive advantage for their products in the global market. Hence, small start-up cost, minimum risk, availability of resources (Seaton, 1996) and environmental and cultural friendliness (Iaonnoides, 1995) induce local communities to participate actively in rural tourism

projects without any gender discrimination. Unlike conventional mass tourism, alternative rural tourism is appreciated and carried out by the rural women community. Furthermore, locally-owned (Innoides 1995) and self-generated (Khan, 1997) rural tourism is capable of supporting the local community to eradicate poverty and reduce dependency. In the Sri Lankan context, rural tourism would benefit the government, since it would reduce the burden of socio-welfare cost in rural areas. On the other hand, it would minimise the destruction of natural resources and socio-culture. Although Sri Lanka has not reached a notable development with rural tourism projects, we can witness some successful projects, such as Rekawa-Tangalle, Walawe Nadee – Ambalanthota Padavigampola-Rambukkana, Kudawa – Sinharaja community-based tourism initiatives, etc. However, local resources and community perception would determine the products of rural tourism, which would vary according to human, physical and geographical settings.

Diversity of Alternative Tourism in Rural Areas

As rural areas or countryside are the geographical locations possessing various kinds of natural and man-made resources and portrayed as a container of traditional cultures, national identities, and “authentic” lifestyles (Kneafsey, 2001), tourism can be very widely diversified (Frochot, 2005). Countryside is capable of attracting and offering a variety of alternative tourism to satisfy various needs of tourists (Frochot, 2005) who are discontented with typical sun-based holidays (Ioannides, 1995). “The collective imagery of rural tourism based on different

elements, such as naturophilia (returned the values to the natural environment), rural roots, a positive image of the rural environment, quality and authenticity, increased mobility and access, cultural changes in post-modern society, changes in tourist market, and tourist experience” (Canoves *et al.*, 2004), have led the tourists and sellers to come forth with diverse rural tourisms. Alternative tourism intends to rediscover the rural areas as diverse tourist destinations, including segmentation of tourism products (Getz and Page, 1997), intimating with a range of names (Scheyvens, 2002); soft tourism, responsible tourism, agro tourism, cultural tourism, community tourism, ecotourism, indigenous tourism, heritage tourism, folk tourism, and volun-tourism, etc.

Cultural and heritage tourism is attracted by cultural landscape (Kneafsey, 2001) of rural community preserved for generations (McDonald and Jolliffe, 2003). Hence, tourism industry has found the new concept of cultural rural tourism, which is underpinned a distinct rural community with its own traditions, heritage, arts, lifestyles, places, and values (Ying and Zhou, 2007). Rural communities are interested in cultural tourism for two reasons, i.e., as an important way for socio-economic promotion (Wang and Zhao, 2001) and, as an essential purpose to preserve local socio-culture (Ying and Zhou, 2007). Thus, cultural or heritage tourism contributes to socio-economic development in rural areas while preserving and conserving the local socio-culture.

Another widely-recognised source for rural tourism is agriculture. Agriculture-based tourism would be named as agro-tourism, vacation farms, farm tourism, etc. As agriculture is a main livelihood of many rural communities, downturn

of the traditional local economy, specially, in agrarian industries (Sharply, 2002) led communities to find another income source for their survival (Hjalager, 1996); supplement the declining of agricultural activities of both subsistence and commercial farms, and generate sufficient income (Reichel *et al.*, 2000); provide a logical and appropriate avenue for the diversification for farmers (Fennel and Weaver, 1997); reduce the out-migration of the young generation through providing additional jobs in service sector (Opperman, 1996). Hence, agriculture-based tourism in rural areas enables the rural communities to regenerate and restore the traditional livelihood while improving the quality of their life.

Ecotourism, which is also an important segment of rural tourism emerged with peace and serenity of the existing ecosystem in addition to rural tranquillity, unsoiled atmosphere, unique fauna and flora, and simplistic and authentic rural lifestyle. Thus, it enables the community empowerment through managing natural resources (Scheyvens, 2002) and preserving environment (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996). It ensures the responsible interaction and utilisation of natural and socio-cultural resources in rural areas while contributing to the local development. It supports the local community to attain social, environmental and economic goals required for sustainable development in rural areas.

The contemporary sustainable rural development perspectives and negative impacts of conventional tourism have led the tourism industry to discover the above-mentioned diverse alternative tourism concepts and products. Although different names and

concepts are tagged with rural tourism, strong participation of local community in the development and decision-making process (Tosun, 2004) is inevitable. Socio-cultural and environmental fabric of the countryside determine the structure, scope and significance of rural tourism, whereas local community should be the main actor in development.

Design and Development of Rural Tourism Products

Although, rural tourism is recognised as a strategy for rural development (Sharpley, 2002, Scheyvens, 2002), identifying and selecting appropriate alternative tourism will determine the sustainability. Rural tourism is a fast-growing small sector in the world tourism (Lordkipanidze *et al.*, 2005) and a suitable means of economic development (Fleischer and Felsenstein, 2000). Moreover, it can balance economic growth with environmental and socio-cultural concerns (Ioannides, 1995). Here, designing and development of tourism products in rural areas ensure the achievement of social, environmental and economic goals.

In the evolution of the rural tourism development, planning includes a number of activities (Reid *et al.*, 2004), such as, physical and human geographical assessment, inventorisation of socio-cultural and natural resources, analysis of developmental gap, demonstration and awareness creation on rural tourism, capacity building, integration of different sectors and stakeholders, value clarification, establishing community-based tourism organisations (CBTO), incarnation of alternative tourism products, establishing facilities, and marketing and promotional campaigns. These should be carried out under the direction of the community. Community-centred

development (Murphy, 1995) process ensures sustainability rather intervention of national government or planning agencies in rural area. It is well understood the importance of the community participation in planning and development of the rural tourism. Therefore, if the rural tourism is planned and developed by an external institution or an individual alone, it would be another alternative avenue for the urban business giants to grab rural resources under the labels of community and sustainability, in spite of contributing to local sustainable development.

Ensuring Sustainability with Rural Tourism

Ensuring sustainability is the major requirement in rural development. As tourism is the key for the sustainable development (Jolliffe and Aslam, 2009), diversification of tourism in rural areas would fulfil this, in addition to preserving and conserving their socio-culture and environment. Small-scale and locally-owned diverse entrepreneurship development, and utilisation of the existing socio-cultural and environmental resources in rural tourism will add value to local resources, create alternative sources of income, regenerate traditional livelihoods and employment for the youth and increase women's contribution to local development. Further, reduction of disparities between urban and rural areas (Liu, 2005), and integration of different sectors would occur. Rural tourism would be a vehicle for safeguarding the integrity of countryside resources, enhancing the rural economy and maintaining the rural way of life (Lane, 1994; Hall and Jenkins, 1998; Roberts and Hall, 2001; Garrod, *et al.*, 2006) with local resource capitalisation, community empowerment, and preservation of socio-culture and environment in rural areas.

In tourists' point of view, visitor satisfaction can be enhanced and broaden through rural tranquillity, unpolluted atmosphere, countryside amicable hospitality, simplistic and authentic lifestyle, exotic and unique natural and man-made attractions (Fredericks, 1993), environmental and biodiversity collectively (Sharpley, 1996) lead to continuous flow of tourists.

Alternative Tourism in Rural Development of Sri Lanka

Currently, alternative tourism is not a widely-accepted development strategy in Sri Lanka. Nevertheless, it has a huge potential for sustainable rural development. Development of rural Sri Lanka is the major political, social and economic perseverance since independence. Although socio-welfare-based economic policies enabled the country to reach a sufficient level in literacy and health, generally, they have not been able to overcome problems in rural development. Many community empowerment projects, such as household coupon, *Janasavi*, *Samurdhi* and other government concessionary packages were able to provide a temporary solution or political salvation rather than providing a sustainable solution. Further, development and decision-making process in the rural areas have ignored the community participation and followed the top-down approach. Tourism also has been no exception and lacks the socio-economically and environmentally balanced and diversified growth in Sri Lanka (Aslam, 2004). So, sustainable development in rural areas has not been entrenched by tourism. Some rural tourism ventures or enterprises have been commenced by privately-owned operators with eco or community tourism labels. Alternative tourism has not been

incorporated or absorbed as a rural development strategy, even though rural areas possess unique and diverse resources. As a result of inadequate and inappropriate capitalisation of local resources, sustainable development of rural areas has not been taken place. Tourism industry in Sri Lanka has failed to diversify the tourism in rural areas to benefit the countryside, nevertheless, there are possibilities for alternative tourism, such as, cultural/heritage tourism, ecotourism, community-based tourism, agro/farm tourism, responsible tourism, homestay tourism, peace tourism, indigenous tourism, etc. Although, ending of the civil war pushes the tourist arrival considerably, tourism industry is unable to widen the benefits to hinterland or countryside for sustainable development.

A few rural tourism development projects in the country witness the success of the endeavours. For example, Rekawa community-based tourism development through Rekawa Development Foundation; Padavigampola Homestay Tourism Village in Rambukkana; Kudawa Community-based Tourism at Sinharaja, Walawe Nadee Community-based Tourism - Ambalanthota enabled the community to find alternative income sources, to generate new employment opportunities, to manage natural resources, to refrain from destruction of natural resources such as forests, mangroves, corals, habitats of turtles, etc, to regenerate the traditional livelihood while preserving the environment and socio-culture. Active participation of communities, integration of tourism with human, physical and geographical resources and bottom-up approach development process substantiate the importance of alternative tourism in rural sustainable development.

Accordingly, diversification of alternative tourism in rural areas would ensure the solutions for the prevailing socio-economic and environmental issues, in addition to improving the well-being of the community.

Conclusion

Tourism is the largest and fast-growing industry capable of overcoming many contemporary socio-economic and environmental challenges in the world. Generally, rural areas are the spacious territories, where development is a burning issue and they need immediate and urgent attention to improve the socio-economic and environmental well-being. Diminishing resource capacity, decline in traditional livelihood sources, outmigration of youth have led the rural community to search for alternative avenues to restructure and regenerate the rural socio-economy while preserving the socio-culture and environment. Diversification of tourism in rural areas makes it possible to overcome these problems to ensure sustainable development. Alternative tourism intends to rediscover the rural human and physical geography as valuable resources and reconceptualise as capital to empower the socio-economy and environment in rural areas. Whatever the names have been tagged with rural alternative tourism products, it should take local socio-culture, environment and economy into consideration. Eventually, participation, empowerment and sustainable development are sequentially interrelated actions in the development process that should be undertaken in bottom-up approach to attain the objectives successfully. As rural areas are the major concerns of the social, political and economic will of Sri

Lanka, many rural community development or empowerment projects and packages were initiated and some were concluded without any success. Yet, sustainable improvement of the socio-economic well-being of the rural community is the biggest challenge for Sri Lanka. Diversification of alternative tourism in rural Sri Lanka would help to overcome the development challenges while preserving the socio-culture and environment.

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