LOCAL VERSUS EXTERNAL INTERVENTIONS
IN RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract. This paper is an attempt to understand the socio-political dynamics taking place within the local community as rural tourism is developing, and how this reflects upon social actors that are engaged (or not) in development practices, their interactions and development process itself. The insights in the rural tourism development process, presented in this paper are drawn from an actor-oriented perspective. Applying actor-oriented approach to the context of rural tourism development allows conceptualizing it as a dynamic, on-going process that is shaped and reshaped by social actors who are not passive recipients of the consequences or impacts of rural tourism development policy, but are instead capable to negotiate the outcomes of a given situation. Rural tourism is, thus, an emergent property.

Key words: rural tourism, local development, community, intervention, actor-oriented approach

1. INTRODUCTION

The rural tourism development generally has many different faces and dimensions ranging from economic, historical, social and political to mention just a few. It is also more then just a planned intervention by the government or a development institution. It can be seen as a dynamic, on-going socially constructed and negotiated process that involves many social actors (e.g., individuals, groups and institutions). There are many realities of rural tourism development which are based on actors’ different perceptions and opinions, and these multiple realities influence the ways actors respond to the changing circumstances brought upon them (i.e., the rural tourism development project).


This paper focuses on exploring *bottom-up intervention* initiated by the local social actors aiming at advancing their interests and reshaping external development actions, as opposed to the *external intervention* (i.e., planned measures and policies by the State, development institutions, including research institutions) and argues that sustainable rural tourism development cannot be achieved without understanding what occurs at the local level and without support and cooperation of the rural communities that it will effect.

Looking at the phenomenon of rural tourism development at the local community level several questions arise: How are the terms of tourism development negotiated? Who has the responsibility and the possibilities to set the goals in the local community and make decisions? Who does and does not (but should) participate in decision-making?

Social actors operate within certain socio-economic and political context, facing different limitations and constraints. The capacity of actors to deal with these limitations and constraints, to give meaning to them, to organize and to plan strategically is the nucleus of the concept of a human agency. A. Arce argues that the term *agency* covers the styles by which actors embody, internalize and translate the influence of the State, market, technology culture:

"The particular translation of contextual influence shape human actions and provide actors with the cognitive characteristics to organize, assemble and respond to influences in their lives."  

In general terms, the notion of agency attributes to the actors capabilities of “difference making” to a pre-existing state of affairs or course of affairs. However, as pointed out by Long and Van der Ploeg, agency is not simply the result of possessing certain cognitive abilities, persuasive powers or charisma, but it also requires organizing capacities. Thus, agency (and consequently power) is constituted through social relations and negotiation practices among social actors. In other words, agency and power both depend on the emergence of networks of actors who become, in most cases partially, enrolled in the projects and practices of other actors. Effective agency thus requires the strategic manipulation of the network of social relationships and channeling of specific items (e.g., information) through certain networks. This

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5 Ibidem.
implies concentrating the analysis of rural tourism development’s process on how people organize themselves through social relations, social representations and negotiation practices, thus on their strategies.

Different social actors are involved in rural tourism development at the local community level ranging from the local actors (i.e., local tourism society, municipality, members of local community, local associations and similar) to actors from the extended scene beyond the boundaries of the local community (i.e., the State, development agencies, various ministries, investors etc.). What is the relation between the external and the internal actors/intervening parties in rural tourism development? How they negotiate the terms of development among themselves, and what are the effects of those negotiations on rural tourism outcomes? These are some of the questions that will be explored in this paper. As said, the development of rural tourism is embedded in a given social, political, and historical context; and an in-depth study of social dynamics is essential to understanding of how rural tourism development is negotiated at the local level with the view to contributing to the development of sustainable tourism that benefits the local communities.

2. RURAL TOURISM AS AN EMERGENT PROPERTY

Rural tourism does not develop in a vacuum and the local communities – which are not homogeneous – as potential beneficiaries of tourism opportunities are not passive recipients of the consequences or impacts of tourism. They struggle, negotiate and transform the process to gain most benefits from it. Using actor-oriented approach to investigate the phenomenon implies certain methodological and theoretical considerations:

1) the identification of actors that are crucial to an understanding of the specific arenas of action and contestation;
2) investigations and analysis of issues or “critical events” as defined by actors themselves;
3) ethnographic exploration of different actors’ realities, strategies and social practices, thus the ways in which their actions are materialized (made concrete) through the use and manipulation of various resources and discourses.

These factors elude to the need for attention given to social configurations, social networks and patterns of organization through which the meanings and social constructions of value generated in different arena/situations are distributed.

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6 Arenas are defined as social encounters or series of situations in which contests over issues, resources, values and representations take place; these are social and spatial locations (e.g., pubs, and the market place and similar) where actors confront each other, mobilize social relations and deploy discursive and cultural means for attaining specific ends (N. Long, op. cit.).
Further, actor-oriented approaches might employ looking closer at the organizing and ordering processes relevant to the different arenas and institutional domains. Further, portraying the critical interfaces that depict the points of contradiction or discontinuity between different actors’ lifeworlds (actor specific set of motives, emotions, daily actions and behavior) might be useful. In these arenas and interfaces the processes of knowledge/power construction are entailed which requires attention be paid to the reconfiguration of relationships and values.

Long’s actor-oriented theoretical and methodological constructivist approach to development and intervention is useful for addressing and analyzing the ways in which the multi-faceted social dimensions of the dynamics of rural tourism development are socially and discursively constructed. It also allows to see the development of rural tourism at the local level as a result of complex sets of agencies and struggles versus a “thing” that exists in and of itself at the different levels of social segregation; it is asserted, that rural tourism is in collusion with the local as well as external interests and various other agendas. Through an actor-oriented approach this researcher attempts to demythologize the social realities of rural tourism development.

Application of the actor-oriented approach to the context of rural tourism development, firstly, makes it possible to conceptualize rural tourism development as a dynamic and on-going socially constructed and negotiated process, and not simply as the execution of an already specified plan of action with expected outcomes. Within this process social actors negotiate and struggle to make most out of a given situation. Thus, rural tourism is an emergent property. Secondly, the actor-oriented perspective regards people as “active” and “knowledgeable” agents that have (human) agency – a notion that attributes to the individual actor or group capacity to process social experience and devise ways of coping with life. However, the various actors will perceive and respond differently to changing circumstances brought upon them by the development of rural tourism. Long suggests that they will align themselves with various normative and social interests. This means actors will form alliances with different local (and external actors) to

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7 N. Long uses the concept of “domain” to identify areas of social life that are organized by reference to a series of interlocking practices and values which, even if they are not perceived exactly in the same way by everybody, are nevertheless recognized as a locus of certain “rules”, norms and values implying degrees of social commitment. Examples may include the domains of the family, the community, the political domain, and so on. This conceptualization allows also for less enduring domains to be identified as the process evolves and new institutions emerge or become institutionalized.


pursue their own social projects sometimes bringing pressure to bear. An actor-oriented approach, allows us to look at the rural development process from the perspective of the people [flesh and blood] themselves, while allowing us to see it in the wider socio-economic and political context in which it is embedded.

All the above suggest the need to identify social actors involved in the process of rural tourism at the local level, the strategies they devise to “transform” this process reshape and reconstruct it with their actions and meanings, the types of interactions that evolve at the local community level, and the interactions between local and external actors. Thus, an investigation into the processes of actors’ organizing practices (i.e., social networks, family clans, cliques, factions and even more formally constituted groups and organizations such as local councils and so on) is needed as well as attention should be given to the different social arrangements and discursive/normative commitments that emerge from these interactions. Further, an inquiry into power relations in an everyday-life situation, the local patterns of power and domination is required.

3. THE SETTING AND FINDINGS

The site of the case study was in Pišece Local Community, a small community of 1200 inhabitants in the Southeast of Slovenia that requested assistance to develop their local community. Pišece Village is a pleasant, tidy village in a natural setting of hills, woodlands, and vineyards with a population of about 400. The village has its own primary school, post-office, fire station, bus station, a few pubs, and a church. There are five other smaller villages that make up the Pišece Local Community. The main focus of the study was on the various social actors, who tried to transform rural tourism development, as well as on the gap between national planning and policy concerning the development of tourism (in rural areas), and on what actually happens.

An account of the new political, policy, and social realities existing in Slovenia, co-existing with the old political hierarchies and power structures that are still very much present today was developed using ground theory approach. Data were collected using ethnography and other qualitative methods over a period of 3 years, methods consisted of: extended unstructured interviews of local community members in both formal and informal positions of authority, life histories of key family clan members11, extended case studies12, participatory observation13 and a

situational analysis of critical events and issues\textsuperscript{14} (e.g., the meeting of local board). The actor-oriented approach made it possible to understand the strategies of the various local and external social actors who were involved in rural tourism development.

4. DISCUSSION

After completing the study, author’s overall view is that the rural tourism development process is not only a planned process (external intervention), but a process involving many actors who continuously reshape and transform it. At the local level, the process was dominated by competition between the various social groupings (e.g., family clans and cliques) and factionalism and thus, it is important to consider the local organizing practices, (power) relations and social networks that occur within local communities when planning for future developments in rural tourism. It was seen, for example, that the more powerful the family clans, networks or cliques were, the more likely their interests would be implemented, and consequently the more likely it was, the more likely they wanted to keep their position of power. The bottom-up initiative/intervention by the young inhabitants that aimed to advance local interests influenced even those actors responsible for rural development (e.g., the municipal authorities) who viewed rural development from new perspectives in the general term of development. On the other hand, an external intervention by external actors partly contributed to the change in perceptions of the local actors.

The major impetus for encouraging rural tourism at the local level was apparently for economic (the idea of a better life-style) and social (a fear of losing younger generations, and pride – if the neighboring village can do it, we can do it as well) reason. Most locals (and many of the external actors) thought rural tourism would benefit the community in terms of increased income, improved infrastructure, increased employment opportunities, and keeping the younger generation if work was available. These attitudes and opinions were quite universal; however, the ideas of how to achieve these ends were quite diverse with a high level of heterogeneity observed in actors’ strategies, interests, and so on.

Behind the “collective” acceptance of rural tourism development as an alternative for preventing Pišece from “further dying”, within the local community itself were people who tried to incorporate their interests and often hidden agendas in this process, and enroll other actors to follow their view of rural tourism development. In attempts to extend their space for maneuver, thus attempts to strengthen their positional power, and increase their influence over decision-

making in the local context, local actors developed networks with other local (family clans and cliques) and external actors (e.g., the research institutions). At the local level, the formation of social groupings was based upon kinship ties, religious orientation and political affiliation.

Further, the research has shown that not only various local social actors were involved in the development of rural tourism, but also external sets and sub-sets of social actors who had their own interests in the development of the given locality.

The study showed that at the local level, in the site of investigation, a large proportion of the population was involved in rural tourism indirectly. In reality though, only a small group of actors had direct influence over the ongoing development process. This small knit group – a clique – encompassed some of the most important local actors who mainly held the positions of informal power. Among them, which was especially interesting, was the strong presence of the voluntary sector and Catholic Church. The latter was linked to those changes that occurred due to the multi-democratic system of government and the liberalization of culture; suggesting that, in the future, new players in the community development process would have to be reckoned with.

Organizational and social network resources were evidently crucial for the success of different local actors in their quest to achieve what they wanted in the rural development process. The enrollment of local actors in development was regulated and constrained by symbolic boundaries which were defined in terms of their history, and the “powers” they represented. Here symbolic boundaries were recognized as socially constructed. The contrast of social constructions (perceptions, value systems, religious and political orientation) in opposing groups (i.e., “red” versus “black”, “phone” versus “no-phone”) was used as the main sieve for exclusion or inclusion (in the networks and “projects”), and also the main reason why poor cooperation existed in the locality of study. An increased awareness, acceptance or accommodation by different actors of these constructions (in themselves and others), may lead to improved communication and decision making, thus to smooth development. One of the key actors in the development, the CIB for example, was actually a collection of individuals from several opposing groups, and is as such an indication that these divisions can be overcome, at least for a while. Then, the moment of unification may, again, break down into the various realities.

External actors, on the other hand, also could not be viewed as a homogeneous group. They could be divided at least into five different categories: a) government policy makers (who may have clashing interests), b) government development agencies, c) private (commercial) development agencies, d) various national voluntary associations (e.g., STA), and e) public research institutions. The majority of external involvement in the locality of study was based on financial cooperation and gain through the State’s development agencies. The private (commercial) development agencies involvement was usually collaborative with
the State’s development projects supplying capital, thus enabling financial cooperation with the private sector.

Both local as well as external social actors adopted different strategies to act upon their interests. For example, various local actors have built firstly local informal and formal networks and forged links to different actors who occupied important power positions in the local community (i.e., in decision-making formal structure, family clans, or cliques). Thus, new local elite was formed. Secondly, networks to external actors were built by using normative links, political and symbolic sources of power, while in some other cases more informal links were used. And finally, the informal group that most likely contributed to the desired change had, through the process, become slowly aligned with the formal authorities which had positive as well as negative impacts on rural tourism development. Among the positive impacts are the increased possibilities to directly influence formal decision-making within the political domain. Among the negative ones is that the informal groups became more static – retarding their innovativeness and flexibility. Through the passage of time, they have become more and more fixed, and preoccupied with their own interests.

Several actors in the chosen future rural tourist destination were looked upon for guidance and these key-players were a primary frame of reference for other villagers, giving them power to influence the directions of rural tourism development. These key-actors were functioning as developmental power brokers – conduits through which information on rural tourism was obtained, filtered and spread, thus controlled and manipulated. These power brokers were motivators or de-motivators of the different initiatives by virtue of their power status and/or position.