

‘Pro poor tourism’: What’s gone right and what’s gone wrong?

**Caroline Ashley and
Harold Goodwin**

‘Recent poverty reduction strategies increasingly highlight tourism, and new tourism policies contain commitments to harness tourism for poverty reduction – not just to generate foreign exchange... Tourism practitioners need to respond to this new opportunity with robust approaches and proven results.’

When a new term is coined, it can provide a focus for rallying attention, or it can be a diversion into a cul-de-sac of misuse and misinterpretation. Since the term ‘pro poor tourism’ (PPT) was coined in 1999, it has achieved both. Several organisations now focus on tourism-poverty linkages. But agreement on what this means in practice, and demonstrable examples that boost the real benefits for the poor from engaging in tourism, remain scarce.

The term was first used in work for the UK’s Department for International Development, exploring how tourism could contribute to poverty reduction. It was presented to the United Nations in 1999. Pro-poor tourism aimed to put ‘poverty at the heart of the tourism agenda’ and the Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership was formed in 1999 to pursue this goal.¹

Some successes...

Seven years on from the adoption of the concept by the UN, pro-poor tourism has had some success in focusing attention on the positive and negative impacts that tourism has on poverty. A marked shift can be seen among African Governments, where recent poverty reduction strategies increasingly highlight tourism, and new tourism policies contain commitments to harness tourism for poverty reduction – not just to generate foreign exchange. In Asia, the Asian Development Bank has led the way among multilaterals in adopting pro-poor tourism. The Dutch development organisation, SNV, has Pro Poor Sustainable Tourism advisors in Asia, Africa, Central and South America. The United Nations World Tourism Organisation has established a Trust Fund and Programme: ‘Sustainable Tourism – Eliminating Poverty.’ United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) documents highlight the economic significance of tourism for least developed countries. And a range of conserva-

tion and development NGOs assist the poor to engage in tourism on the ground.

... and some concerns

Despite some welcome progress in developing pro-poor tourism approaches, three major concerns remain.

A limited focus

The first is that pro poor action remains focussed at the micro level. Pro-poor tourism is – or should be – an approach applicable to all forms of tourism including mainstream tourism; not a niche product such as eco-tourism or community tourism. The principles of maximising linkages with the poor can be applied to beach resorts, urban hotels, conferences, wilderness tours, new build projects. However, most tourism for poverty reduction initiatives remain predominantly community-based tourism projects, campsites or trekking. Therefore they cannot deliver impact at a significant scale.

Little attention to markets

Secondly, too little attention is paid to market linkages. The old adage ‘it is not tourism until it is sold’ is neglected. Initiatives often concentrate on providing training and infrastructure, the products fail to find a market demand, domestic or international, and fail to deliver livelihood benefits. In some cases when tourism development is attempted because there is no alternative, communities are encouraged to invest labour, land, and borrowings which have little chance of success.

There are many institutional factors causing these two failures. Expanding the tourism sector and increasing the benefits reaching the poor are seen as separate tasks for different people. So PPT responsibilities are allocated to a part-time ‘community tourism’ staffer, or put under a separate stream of project activities. In the development arena, practitioners

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working with communities know little about commercial tourism markets, attempting projects without bringing in business expertise and private sector partners. In the commercial world, tourism companies readily think about local donations as corporate social responsibility but fewer seek the commercial and local advantage that can come from doing business differently. And in the public sector, a destination level approach to pro-poor tourism would need complementary policies from tourism, agriculture, transport, enterprise, land and finance departments, plus authority and skills at local government level. But neither joined up government nor strong local authorities are common.

Limited documentation

The third problem is the absence of systematic and documented monitoring of changes in poor people's livelihoods due to tourism. We do not know of any destination where the full range of impacts of tourism development on poverty levels (not just of one group but different poor groups) has been rigorously assessed. As for pro poor initiatives, rigorous ex-ante and ex-post assessment is lacking. Despite plenty of literature giving guidance on pro poor strategies to adopt, there is little that quantifies the tangible results. The significant income increases measured in The Gambia as a result of a market access initiative in 2001-2 are still frequently quoted because there are so few examples of published action research in this field.

Building on progress

More recently, however, there have been areas of progress. Two, in particular, need to be built upon.

First, we now have a pretty good idea of the key ingredients of pro poor action, although the relative priorities need to be determined locally. Pro-poor impact is likely to be higher in a destination where out of pocket spending is high, small and micro enterprises have access to capital and business support, un-skilled and semi-skilled workers have access to training, small-scale infrastructure supports local business development, and tourism companies' demand for locally procured products is matched by adequate capacity for production and marketing on the supply side. There is also enough experience to show some useful strategies for building these key elements. One is to make the business case for companies to invest in local linkages (whether based on product quality, licence to operate, or market advantage). Another is to bring together the formal private sector, the small and informal entrepreneurs, residents, and government within a destination and develop a multi-stakeholder partnership approach. A third is to combine pro poor strategies with upgrading the product and the destination, rather than as a disconnected activity. A fourth is to adopt a 'market access' perspective, assessing any product development or regula-

tion to consider how it expands or impedes market access for poor producers.

The second area of progress is in the mainstreaming of pro-poor tourism. There are some specific projects which are clearly taking pro-poor tourism out of its niche. These range from practical engagement – in a classic winter sun destination of the Gambia, and with large corporates in South Africa – to legislative reform, as in Vietnam. New methods are being applied in Laos, The Gambia and Vietnam to map the entire tourism value chain and assess all the areas of participation by the poor. These show that benefits to the poor depend on the strength of linkages across all parts of the tourism value chain – food, shopping and excursions as well as accommodation – and of course on the overall size of the sector. As such they argue against niche interventions.

For too long, tourism 'special pleading' and statistical hyperbole from one side has been met – and reinforced – by tourism disdain from the other. Poverty professionals have no natural affinity with a services sector which pampers the rich, irrespective of how much world GDP the tourism industry claims to generate. But now synergies are emerging. Just as tourism practitioners see the need to 'scale-up' their poverty impact, so mainstream development practitioners are finding their work brings them into tourism: in many poor countries, tourism is so big that strategies for growth, shared growth, or market access for the poor inevitably include tourism. Local economic development specialists are responding to requests to integrate tourism into their strategies. Competitiveness analyses of poor economies such as Rwanda are highlighting tourism potential. And the World Bank and International Finance Corporation are developing projects which aim to assist public and private sector development of tourism in ways that hit the central target – poverty reduction on a significant scale. This offers tremendous potential to pool expertise in both tourism and development.

Tourism practitioners need to respond to this new opportunity with robust approaches and proven results. This will mean taking practical action at local destination level that combines competitiveness, business linkages, and growth with new employment opportunities, micro enterprises and demonstrable positive impact on poor people's lives.

Endnotes

1. See www.propoortourism.org.uk
2. Bah A & Goodwin H (2003) Improving Access for the Informal Sector to Tourism in The Gambia Pro-Poor Tourism, Pro-Poor Tourism Working Paper #15, http://www.propoortourism.org.uk/15_Gambia.pdf

Written by Caroline Ashley (c.ashley@odi.org.uk), ODI Senior Research Associate and Harold Goodwin (Harold@haroldgoodwin.info), Professor of Responsible Tourism Management, in the International Centre for Responsible Tourism at Leeds Metropolitan University.

Caroline and Harold are founder members of the Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership.



Overseas Development Institute

111 Westminster Bridge Road, London SE1 7JD

Tel: +44 (0)20 7922 0300

Fax: +44 (0)20 7922 0399

Email: publications@odi.org.uk

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