

Local participation for a higher commitment to destination development

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Local participation for a higher commitment to destination development

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Abstract

The idea of involving local communities in destination development is far from new. However, the extent to which participation is inclusive, active, and voluntary remains worthy of further investigation. Literature to date has continued to place a heavy focus on resident attitudes and has highlighted place attachment and cultural values in resource evaluation that often accompany destination development appraisal activities. Despite this, there has been a

dearth of attention paid to the influence of wider socio-political factors and contexts on development outcomes and levels of commitment or 'buy-in'. The way in which destination development is understood and the extent to which it is open to challenge inevitably impacts on the measurement of levels of commitment towards it. Despite acknowledgement of the value of increased participatory approaches to tourism development, there have been few attempts to reflect on the nature of actor behaviours and factors of influence that impact on responses to proposed and enacted change.

In this chapter we consider the extent to which local participation in destination development in lesser developed contexts might be more deeply understood, drawing on western and eastern academic literature source materials. We harness our collective and differentiated experiences of researching and working in tourism environments within central Asia, east Asia, and south-east Asia to provide case examples that relate to aspects of local commitment to destination development and document how and why change happens. A particular focus is placed on the representation of diverse ethnic positions as we explore potential power-driven gaps or space between policy-driven destination development inputs and desired change and note the influence of actor-based contexts that impact upon types and levels of commitment to destination development. Through this lens we identify a future research agenda to study local participation in tourism and sustainable, inclusive, and equitable destination-based community development initiatives.

Key words: local communities; destination development; participation; commitment; tourism

Introduction

The idea of involving local communities in destination development is far from new. However, the extent to which participation is inclusive, active, and voluntary remains worthy of further investigation. As Higgins-Desbiolles remarks (2019:1) “If tourism is to have a sustainable future, we need to reorient our focus and put the well-being and interests of local residents at the forefront”.

Local participation in destination development has captured the interest of tourism researchers since the 1950s, alongside an increase in countries receiving international tourists (Goodwin, 1998). Valene Smith’s (1977) anthropological seminal work on hosts and guests drew attention to potential socio-cultural tourism impacts and related processes of socio-cultural change arising from interactions between tourists and local communities (Půtová, 2018). Almost a quarter of a century later, as we entered a new millennium, Smith (2001:11) noted how:

“...the growing economic dependence of many nations and regions on tourism, together with the sociopolitical-cultural changes that tourism has generated (and will further magnify in the decades ahead)...necessitates this reexamination of the anthropology of tourism.”

Linkages between globalisation and tourism development have been much acknowledged and have often anticipated reduced cultural space between hosts and guests. However, the extent to which cultural globalisation has occurred through diffusion processes, and associated creation and expansion of social relations, linked to international tourism development is still under-explored. We note that processes of social change may face resistance in particular geographical contexts and may certainly not occur in predictable

uniform patterns. Furthermore, as Steiner and Reisinger (2004:118) have noted responses to “the ‘spacing’ of culturally different individuals” is founded upon a particular conceptualisation of intercultural communication that seeks to find “common ground or understanding” rather than attempting to reconcile or highlight cultural differences.

As we begin this chapter, we note that, globally, rates of destination development remain uneven (UNWTO, 2023). Linked to this is a notable persistence in geographical inequalities in income and livelihood chances that frustrate inclusive participation in international tourism. Collectively, in our research to-date (see for example, Chuamuangphan, 2009; Chuamuangphan, 2016; Chuamuangphan et al., 2020; Dorjsuren, 2009; Dorjsuren, 2014; Dorjsuren & Palmer, 2018; Palmer, 2006; Palmer, 2007; Palmer, 2009; Palmer, 2022; Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2017; Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018), we have observed issues of social justice, fairness, equity and identity politics in tourism development processes and outcomes in parts of Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan), East Asia (Mongolia), and Southeast Asia (Thailand). In this chapter we build on that geographical focus (see Figure 1).



Figure 1: The location of Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Thailand within Asia

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Asia has been traditionally understood as part of a ‘global south’ or ‘third world’ in a (western-driven) arena where there has been a focus on international development and assistance flowing between countries from north to south (Horner, 2020). This conceptualisation has been in line with neo-liberalist theories of economic development, encouraging free market capitalism and globalisation. Furthermore, the idea of a ‘commodified’ paradigm in tourism development, focused on economic use-value (Wearing et al., 2005) that reflects the idea of knowledge being transplanted (Hall & Tucker, 2004), with

dissemination “geared to Western modes of academic knowledge production and their evaluation” (Hall & Page, 2016:376) is noted.

Drawing on generic (North to South or West to East) approaches to development is inevitably problematic, particularly in view of the prominence of divides in life chances based on identity, ethnicity, race, place of residence, socioeconomic status and community positions (United Nations, 2020). Furthermore, as Horner (2020) notes, many approaches to development have been based on the idea of social change across space in contrast to issue-based challenges of transformation and change such as social exclusion, quality of life and poverty “resonating across both the Global North and South (De Haan & Maxwell, 1998’ Gaventa, 1998; Maxwell, 1998; Therien, 1999)” (Horner, 2020:417).

Local participation and destination development commitment

Many western-based studies of local participation in tourism draw attention to the notion of ‘willingness’ to participate, a desire to influence participatory decision making, and the existence of high place attachment. The extent to which local participation in destination development is desirable and possible has received relatively little consideration. As Lo and Janta (2020:1493) have observed, “Since the 1980s, tourism literature has observed that a basic key resource in tourist sustainability is involvement and inclusion of local residents in local communities (Hardy et al., 2002)”. Yet despite many attempts to illustrate the potential benefits of or ‘wins’ from tourism development for local residents, especially those who actively engage (Gezon, 2014), there appears to be an underlying premise or assumption that local participation is driven by sense of community (Aref, 2011), altruistic values or ‘civic virtue’ (Tang et al, 2021). The extent to which participation opportunities are promoted equitably and open to all may be questioned however (Gutierrez, 2022). Not participating does not necessarily reflect the (lack of) community values of an individual. Furthermore,

epistemic bias is observable; Tosun (2000) has identified a participatory development approach to be a normative concept, originating from a developed worldview.

There has been a tendency to equate participation with an aspiration to actively influence development trajectories and to connect involvement with (desired) control (Blackstock, 2005; Cheong & Miller, 2000; Lea, 1988). However, as we have previously noted, “The issue of appropriate participation in policy decision-making is complex and culturally-specific norms and societal values need to be taken into account” (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018:322). Despite recognition of local residents as valuable destination development stakeholders, to date, there has been relatively little attention paid to positionality and personal and social contexts on the development outcomes and levels of local commitment or ‘buy-in’ – and the implications of this. For example, studies of local resident resistance to destination development and change have often overlooked the extent to which responses reflect tourism as being marginal or central to discontent and the shifting of attitudes over time. There is a need to question why there might be a desire to participate in the first place.

Local commitment to destination development has previously been explored in relation to community attachment and involvement (Safshekan et al., 2020), place identity and the facilitation of stakeholder co-operation (Komppula, 2016), destination development responsibilities and level of leadership (Tuohino & Konu, 2014), engagement in destination branding as a form of citizenship in the promotion of place development (Jeuring & Haartsen, 2017), social exchange theory and social network theory analyses of support for tourism based on perceived community-level impacts (Chang, 2021; Rasoolimanesh et al., 2017). Local community participation has often been positioned as critical to tourism development *per se* and vital to sustainable tourism development, strategically positioned in terms of offering value for local communities, their lifestyles, and the sharing of a common objective

and destination goal. This has contributed to theories of tourism development that advocate community participation (see for example: Nault & Stapleton, 2011; Pasanchay & Schott, 2021; Saufi et al., 2014; Tosun, 1999).

Despite acknowledgement of the value of increased participatory approaches to tourism development, there have been few attempts to reflect on the nature of actor behaviours and factors of influence that impact responses to proposed and enacted change. Although more holistic perspectives of destination development have been sought, it may be argued that these have not been without limitations. For example, categorisation of – and reference to ‘key informants’ risks privileging the voices of specific actor groups and may mask the existence of alternative and minoritised perspectives that can influence the extent to which development initiatives are accepted and embraced by local communities. Additionally, the employment of snowball sampling techniques present bias in terms of whose viewpoints are potentially included and excluded by virtue of social capital. Triangulation of sources may help to achieve further insights into local participation through the accessing of a wider range of local voices.

Our focus

In this chapter a comparative approach is taken, looking at Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Thailand and focusing on certain aspects or dimensions of local participation in destination development. Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia have been highlighted for embracing democracy and economic reform following the break-up of the USSR and their establishment as independent republics. In theory, the political framework conditions of these two countries allow for local community participation but corruption has been identified as an obstacle to political and socioeconomic progress (BTI, 2022a; BTI, 2022b; Freedom House, 2022; USAID, 2023).

Thailand, enjoying democracy and public participation under a constitutional monarchy and the “people's constitution” in 1997, has over the past two decades transitioned from military to a semi-elected government. Local voting rights have been restored but democratic deterioration is noted alongside the political marginalisation of ethnic minority groups (Freedom House, 2022). It is noted however that current prospects for the formation of a new government suggest a possible move to a progressive democratic era in Thai politics (Sangnak, 2023). Despite political instabilities, the national tourism strategies for each of the three destinations have consistently included community-based tourism aspirations since the 1990s/2000s.

We ask the following questions:

- What are the common motivations for participation in destination development?
- How inclusive is local community participation in destination development?
- What levels of activity in local community participation are discernible?
- To what extent does local participation impact on destination development?

We consider the extent to which local participation in destination development in lesser developed contexts might be more deeply understood, drawing on a thematic review of existing Western and Eastern source materials. Initial scoping of non-English language sources relating to destination development in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Thailand respectively revealed a dearth of discussion of local participation. Literature was noted to be excessively focused on descriptive and technical resource audits and guidelines in relation to destination development to attract and sustain tourist demand. Additionally, our intention to draw on academic literature in local languages was complicated by what Ren and Rousseau (2004), Rhekhalilit and Lerdpaisalwong (2019), and Xian (2006) have previously noted as an increase in English language academic journals in non-English dominant countries.

Thus, from here-on-in we engage with source materials accessed through ‘advanced’ Google Scholar searches, Researchgate.net, and online news media and harness our collective and differentiated experiences of researching and working in tourism environments within Central Asia, East Asia, North Asia, and South-east Asia to reflect on local participation and destination development and commitment in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Thailand, in turn.

Local participation and destination development in Kyrgyzstan

In Kyrgyzstan we observe how local residents have been recognised to possess cultural resource value but, post-1991 integration into the global tourism system, government motivation has been to attract international tourists by virtue of ‘othering’, focusing on cultural differences as novel, linked to national identity-building and representation. This has resulted in some groups of local residents being perceived to hold more touristic value than others. There is limited information available on the scale of local participation in tourism in Kyrgyzstan. Baktygulov and Raeva (2010) estimated that 350 local families (1400 people) were involved in community-based tourism in Kyrgyzstan in the early 2000s. Watanabe et al. (2009) have claimed that 412 jobs were created by community-based tourism groups in 2008 and Asykulov (2012) has highlighted the contribution of eco-tourism to range between 5-50% of household income.

Motivations for destination development at a government level have been clearly economic and political. Tourism as an economic diversification opportunity has been supported through state prioritisation and investment (Izvorski & Gürgen, 1999; Kozhokulov et al., 2021a) and internally there has been a growing interest in the socio-economic impacts of tourism (Kozhokulov et al., 2021b) particularly in tourism ‘hotspots’ that are less

challenged by infrastructural issues that hamper international tourist access (Clayton cited in Jasek, 2005; Palmer, 2007; Bashiri, 1999 as cited in Palmer, 2009; Thompson & Foster, 2003; Toktoraliev et al., n.d.) and persist alongside negative local authority and local resident attitudes towards the value in meeting ‘international standards’ to compete in the global tourism system (Kozhokulov et al., 2021c). This extract from Talant’s (2022:1) news report that relates to the views of a mountain guide and photographer from Kyrgyzstan highlights that there are issues that may relate to capabilities and local participation:

“Tourism is a very attractive business. However, we don’t have real professionals in it. Sometimes it’s a really big problem to find a good guide who knows a specific area, who can speak English or maybe German and French. Sometimes, you can’t find a trustworthy driver because some are busy, some have their cars broken, or some are not at the location.”

Linked to this, has emerged recognition of the opportunities afforded by sustainable development to balance tourist growth with resource limitations (Kozhokulov et al., 2021d) especially in protected areas. However, in relation to involvement of local people in tourism it has been observed that the number of local residents involved in the provision of services to tourists remains limited (Kozhokulov et al., 2021e). One reason for a lack of active local participation in tourism may relate to a lack of attention paid to entrepreneurship in the country’s primary and secondary education system (Umurzakov et al., 2020). Hence, values and mindsets espoused through state education curricula emerge as a potential factor affecting levels of activity in tourism participation.

Our earlier research related to local participation in tourism noted the impact of ethnic divides, cultural repression, and power differentials in Kyrgyzstan, reflecting deeper rooted political histories of the destination and its development. Ethnic heritage has effectively

presented an inclusion-exclusion criterion with respect to local participation opportunities promoted by the state. We have previously noted Okeyeva's remarks, "during the Soviet period everything before that time was excluded, now people exclude the Soviet period. It was biased before and [is] now" (Okeyeva, 2004 as cited in Palmer, 2006:45-46). We have also observed from an internal perspective however, that "in contrast to the reported ethnic conflict over affirmative discrimination towards the ethnic Kyrgyz population" (Palmer, 2007:645) support exists for promotional bias to this group of locals from ethnic Russian locals. Here, we are minded of the ideas of Doğan (1989) with respect to groups within a community being diversified in relation to touristic developments; in Kyrgyzstan certain social groups are afforded differing positions and status in relation to the 'tourist gaze'. The focus on specific groups of locals has shifted over time due to changes in government and politics. Gullette (2010) has acknowledged the creation of the 'state' post-independence and a corresponding creation of the concept of a 'Kyrgyz person' as an ethnic identity as part of the genealogical construction of the Kyrgyz Republic. Nurgaziev et al.'s (2019:6) exploration of local perceptions of tourism benefits in rural Kyrgyzstan reveals that "cultural aspects, such as feelings of pride and ethnic identity, play major role in local perceptions". In this context destination development may be clearly aligned to nation building and the identity of local people.

Technical assistance programmes funded from the West have tended to target ethnic Kyrgyz populations in rural areas facing the highest poverty and income inequality levels after the removal of Soviet subsidies. External development agency intervention in Kyrgyzstan's tourism development may not only interfere with free market competition (Palmer, 2006) but may also distort opportunities for local involvement in destination development. However, we can observe that although NGO assistance programmes may have provided more opportunities for ethnic Kyrgyz citizens to participate (see for example

UNDP, 2022a), this did not mean that other groups of locals ceased to be involved in tourism. Palmer's fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan revealed that Russian tour operators (as former sportspeople who had developed tourism businesses linked to their mountaineering skills when the republic was part of the USSR) were still participating in destination development (focusing on specialised adventure tourism markets). Their commitment to destination development seemingly remained strong.

Recent media reports offer further insights into local participation in tourism in Kyrgyzstan. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the disruption on international tourism has prompted exploration of how local involvement in tourism has been affected. Cirillo's (2021) reporting on Sary-Mogol village, close to Lenin's Peak in the South-east of Kyrgyzstan reveals how locals had capitalised on mountain tourists to develop community-based tourism that has enjoyed growth through generations – shifting from guesthouse accommodation to yurt camp provision, crafts markets, winter guide training and events-based attractions. This emerged from a family business, driven by the foresight of an individual local resident and has become a tourism incubator that enabled breadth of villager participation. The loss of tourism reveals the extent to which local people had grown dependent on seasonal tourism as a secondary livelihood option and income diversification strategy. More broadly, it highlights the influence of exogenous forces on how change happens, indicating how local participation can cease and commitment to destination development can shift to through economic necessity and a need to prioritise personal economic survival.

Reflecting on personal communications with ethnic Russian tour operators in Kyrgyzstan which revealed sustained interest and involvement in destination development in spite of a lack of influence on development decisions (Palmer, 2005; Palmer, 2006) there is a

question as to whether length of time working in tourism as a primary career increases local levels of commitment to destination development. Additionally, we might ask why these locals should continue to participate if they do not profit from and/or are under-valued by tourism policymakers? Looking from the outside in there are certainly opportunities for destination development leadership to better harness and capitalise on the expertise of ethnic Russian tour operators who entered tourism as sportspeople and mountaineering guides.

We note that there has been recent acknowledgement of the potential to re-position destination development in Kyrgyzstan to further exploit a wider range of tourism resources. Coordination and strengthening the capacity of Kyrgyz tourism service provider efforts to create and promote new adventure tourism value chains has been recognised to offer inclusive economic development opportunities “through its capacity to create jobs – especially for women and population in rural areas” (UNDP, 2022b:1). This is dependent on local participation in tourism being viewed as favourable by local people. We are reminded of the earlier work of Shokirov et al. (2014:24) who highlighted the importance of local prosperity, local control, coordination, and commitment to development and cited the views of a leading tour operator in Kyrgyzstan who believed that previous growth rates of 15-20% in the adventure tourism sector had been achieved due to “fruitful collaboration, joint promotion and lobbying of interests by the tourism operators in Kyrgyzstan (Komissarov 2003)”.

Local participation and destination development in Mongolia

Until the early 1990s international access to Mongolia was restricted and international tourist visas were unavailable. The World Bank (2022) has reported that tourism accounted

for 7.6% of total employment in Mongolia in 2019 and Ooluun (2019) has forecast that tourism jobs will have risen from 121,500 to 149,000 between 2017 and 2028.

Motivations for destination development reflect the country's political and economic transition from state-led Soviet socialism. Tourism has been particularly identified as a poverty alleviation tool in a context where poverty rates remain a challenge in both urban and rural areas, "with herders among the poorest of the poor" (Humphris, 2022:1). This is important because as Cleary (1995:144) has noted, "the poorest people are often those least able to bear the costs of organising, thus working with existing groups alone may result in the poorest being bypassed".

As we have previously noted, there have been local expectations in Mongolia that equity in destination development should be driven by state institutional processes and the state has been "very much viewed as an instrumental actor in the production of inequity" (Dorjsuren & Palmer, 2018:82). Lack of information and trust have been identified as key factors in local community empowerment in Mongolia (Balt et al., 2012; Boldbaatar, 2021; Khureldee & Çınar, 2021) alongside unequal distribution of revenues gained from tourism by herder communities (Zagarkhorloo et al., 2021). It is notable that herder communities have been specifically targeted for involvement in community-based tourism due to their interests and experiences in social-ecological integrated practices (Gantemur, 2020; Zagarkhorloo et al., 2021).

In this destination, where, similarly to rural Kyrgyzstan, pastoral herding of livestock (or animal husbandry) is a traditional nomadic means of making a living, tourism has been presented as an economic diversification option. It should be acknowledged here that herders vary in wealth in relation to numbers and type of livestock possessed and participation in tourism alongside herding has been gendered and dependent on household-level incomes

(Dorjsuren & Palmer, 2018; Lkhagvadorj et al., 2013). Furthermore, take-up of off-farm employment in rural Mongolia has been found to reflect individual factors such as education background and age, as well as availability and accessibility of employment opportunities. Tourism is noted to involve ‘costs’ associated with “releasing farm labour to off-farm activities” (Zhang et al., 2019:52).

Linked to this context, it is a choice of livelihood options and standard of living factors together with opportunities and capabilities that impact most evidently on levels of motivation, participation, types of involvement and commitment to destination development (Dorjsuren, 2014; Humphris, 2022). Thus, local realities extend beyond the political and economic motivations noted for Mongolia’s state interest in destination development and the positioning of nomadic people who “viewed as the key engine of their community, who epitomize the local identity” (Gantemur, 2000:59); actively participating in tourism involves decision-making that is often under-acknowledged by policy makers.

Internal rural to urban migration since 1992 has culminated in household income sources and unemployment challenges for:

“Poor nomadic herders who lost their herds in natural disasters or simply chose to enter the informal urban economy while continuing to keep a limited number of animals and migrate seasonally” (Dore & Nagpal, 2006:12).

Additionally, crises of identity have been noted for previously rural residents who now inhabit *ger areas*¹ in Ulaanbaatar and seek livelihood opportunities from the informal economy (Terbish et al., 2022) post-construction development employment that initially attracted them to the city (Bayartsetseg, 2015). In this scenario attention is drawn to the impact of rural-urban migration and lack of state welfare support systems on local

¹ *Ger* areas are semi-permanent camps made up of traditional tent dwellings (*gers*) of Mongolian nomads.

commitment to destination development. Over a decade ago Kamata et al. (2011:21) reporting for the World Bank identified that “The sustainable development of *ger areas* in Ulaanbaatar (UB), the capital city of Mongolia, is one of the critical development issues facing the country”. In that report it is notable that the foreword authored by the Country Manager for Mongolia East Asia and Pacific Region and the Sector Manager Sustainable Development Unit at the World Bank stated that, “Policy makers and citizens of the city will be able to see the implications of the policy choices they make today” (Kamata et al, 2011:6).

Thus, economic and social challenges that are experienced by individuals appear to impact on local participation and destination development. The establishment of *ger areas* in Ulaanbaatar, has been identified as complicating the implementation of the Master Plan for Ulaanbaatar 2030 due to what has been argued to be:

“Limited recognition of culturally significant buildings and the cultural traditions that support them, and very little appreciation of the importance of these assets in the re-development of *ger areas*” (CDIA, 2020:1).

In essence it questions the authentic representation of local lives and supports Shircliff’s (2018) observations of different understandings of cultural authenticity between Mongolia tourism stakeholders.

In contrast to Kyrgyzstan, in Mongolia, although we note tensions between domestic travellers and nomadic community traditions (Dorjsuren, 2009), a focus on nomadic local identity in Mongolia’s tourism promotion does not appear to cause substantial resentment between social groups. As we have previously reported in relation to local participation in tourism in Mongolia:

“Lack of equity in tourism development in a rural Mongolian context is found to be heavily defined by unfair and inequitable state institutional processes, in particular.

This procedural injustice appears to be heavily influenced by social networks and opportunities of access” (Dorjsuren & Palmer, 2018:82).

Gaps between policy-driven destination development inputs and desired change are evident because of the holistic lived experiences of local actors. Amgalan and Gong (2019) have noted the only positive impacts of tourism in Mongolia from a resident perspective to be economic. However, Khureldee and Çınar (2021) have questioned the realities of economic impacts for local people, noting negative effects from tourism development in Mongolia as increased service prices result in weakened affordability. We have previously drawn attention to more burdens than benefits reaching Mongolian grassroots people involved in the provision of tourism (Dorjsuren & Palmer, 2018). We can place this in the context of rural employment opportunities in Mongolia where there have been calls for better jobs and improved livelihoods (Morris & Bruun, 2005).

More recently, there have been reports of COVID-19 impacting four times more greatly on tourism-related jobs than those in other sectors and hitting Mongolia and the rural livelihood options of women especially hard (Ankhtuya, 2021). This questions the potential of tourism to diversify Mongolia's geopolitically challenged economy (Shircliff, 2018). Loss of positive economic effects of tourism accruing to local community members also brings into question the extent to which satisfaction with tourism development (Uslu et al., 2020) might remain and what this means in relation to commitment to destination development.

Local participation and destination development in Thailand

Thailand's position as an established international tourism destination charts back to the 1980s. As Fakfare et al. (2022) have noted, academic research interest in Thailand's

tourism development from Eastern and Western scholars has spanned a wide and diverse focus. However, the extent of local involvement through tourism employment remains difficult to quantify accurately. Focusing on the informal tourism economy in Thailand, Çakmak and Çenesiz (2019:13) have reported:

“The informal tourism economy absorbs the unemployed workforce and particularly female and young unemployed workers. In addition, the informal tourism economy creates jobs primarily for the poor, as it has been noted by Chen (2012).”

It was only in 2009 that tourism was added to the national development agenda (Young & Gabriella, 2019) in recognition of tourism as a major economic development driver.

Boonyasana and Chinnakum (2021) have observed how Thailand's tourism industry has contributed to economic growth, job creation, and poverty reduction. But, the spread of benefits and income distribution across local people has been open to question:

“Tourism expansion in Thailand certainly creates jobs for unskilled workers, and this has a direct poverty alleviation impact. However, much of the gain from tourism growth accrues to factors other than unskilled labor, so income distribution may actually worsen. In addition, low-skilled jobs in other sectors may be destroyed, and returns to agricultural land, from which the poor derive a considerable share of their income, may fall as tourism expands (Wattanakuljarus and Coxhead, 2008).”

(Chancharat, 2011:344).

We have previously found that the involvement of local residents in tourism in Northern Thailand did entail choice but capacity for participation was affected by wider social forces and structural inequalities, fundamentally in relation to land ownership legislation (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2017). We also observed that the perceived status of tourism as a livelihood meant that, in certain traditional rural communities, social stigma was attached to being

involved in tourism but involvement was not fully voluntary and could not always be resisted due to economic income challenges (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018). Thus, local employment in tourism was not necessarily viewed as positive from the perspective of local people.

The development of cultural tourism in Thailand with the intention of supporting social equality has been directly encouraged through the One Tambon One Product (OTOP) initiative whereby local participation is crucial (Pungnirund, 2020) to the ambition of strengthening communities through the making or manufacturing of products, based on the One Village, One Product (OVOP) movement in Japan. A body of research has emerged around this that offers valuable insights into local participation in destination development in Thailand. Thanakijborisut (2022) has highlighted how individual personal characteristics have affected levels and types of participation in OTOP by locals, reflecting capacity to be involved, and how involvement in different forms of tourism activity (decision making, delivery, benefits) impacts on satisfaction of product value. It was found that being a recipient of the economic benefits of tourism was most strongly affected with local levels of tourism involvement satisfaction. However, Thanakijborisut (2022) has also noted impacts relating to the building of local pride, stronger sense of self-identity, and personal confidence in having community identity represented through the production and sales of local products to tourists via OTOP. It has been observed that having tourism focused on local practices or crafts has often been welcomed by local communities as an opportunity to continue or sustain local cultural traditions. Strengthening of local communities through local participation opportunities is a common theme in the literature relating to destination development in a Thai context. However, as Trupp (2014a:367) has revealed in a study of Thai hill tribes, “no, tourists cannot help at all. It is up to us Akha people to keep our Akha culture (Interview with

villager)” and “the predominant interest in and intention behind the hosts’ touristic actions is without a doubt economic” (Trupp, 2014b:62).

We have previously observed through our fieldwork in Thailand that economic concerns were fundamental to the of meeting basic living standards rather than achieving material wealth:

“Only those involved in tourism wanted to be involved in tourism decision-making and they only wanted to be involved to try to influence policies to benefit their own livelihoods rather than for the greater good of the community.” (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2017:334).

Our focus on local participation in tourism in Thailand has explored local community values in relation to notions of fairness and legitimacy regarding resource distribution and tourism benefits. We have noted in relation to three villages in Chiang Rai providing examples of traditional communities challenged by issues of resource scarcity:

“Rather than those being involved in tourism seen as ‘winners’ and those who were not involved in tourism seen as ‘losers’, any winning or losing appeared to be perceived only in relation to economic wealth per se (not solely arising from the tourism sector but from any type of livelihood).” (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2017:139).

More recently, we note controversy in relation to tourism employment opportunities for local people in Thailand. The Professional Guide Association of Thailand has highlighted a mismatch between the number of jobs for Thai tour guides versus the number of incoming tourists. It has been claimed that “illegal foreign guides” are stealing the work, based not on their levels of local knowledge but on their language skills (Fronde, 2023a:1). Linked to this,

there have been reports of the arrests of foreign nationals working illegally as tour guides in Bangkok by the Department of Employment in Thailand (Fronde, 2023b).

This highlights the prominence of the political-legislative context in Thailand – a context that controls who is able to work in sectors of the tourism industry. Although Jun et al. (2016) suggest a link between support for tourism development and reliance on the industry for jobs and income creation in a Thai context, we might question the extent to which support translates into commitment to destination development. We might ask about the aptitude or desire of local guides to develop their skills to compete in the tour guiding profession, for example.

The attitudes and perceptions of local people not only towards tourism as an activity or industry but to the perceived benefits of participating in tourism need to be explored. As Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2014) have noticed in their examination of the determinants of the success of community-based tourism in Chiang Mai, Thailand, there are less recognised stories that need to be heard that force us to see that a combination of circumstances facilitates and sustains local participation in tourism. Linked to this Lo and Janta (2020) draw our attention to key challenges to community involvement in tourism in Thailand – conflict over land ownership, benefit leaking, insufficient financial resources and problems of community participation and involvement common to other developing countries. These challenges are supported by our field observations in Thailand.

Motivations, opportunities and impacts of local participation

The extent to which the well-being and interests of local residents (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2019) are considered in relation to issue-based challenges of transformation and change such as social exclusion, quality of life and poverty (Horner, 2020) must be questioned. In our

exploration of issues of local participation in three Asian destinations tourism was often viewed at a household level as a livelihood option to avoid or alleviate poverty. Economic impacts for individuals tended to motivate local people to be involved in tourism ahead of community level impacts. In this context processes of social change arising through tourism development appear to be connected to achieving a certain level of wealth or aspiration and driven by issue-based challenges. In Mongolia, for example local people were focused on bettering themselves economically and some were putting aside nomadic lifestyles to pursue rural-urban migration in a quest to overcome household income challenges. This may be seen in response to poverty.

This is important because, as Saayman and Giasmpiccoli (2016:145) have emphasised there are some clear distinctions between community-based tourism in its intentions of “facilitating the development of disadvantaged community members” in line with social justice and redistributive measure and pro poor tourism, in its generation of net benefits for the poor. The latter, it is argued, “does not offer great possibilities of changing the status quo” (Saayman and Giasmpiccoli, 2016:145). In our explorations of local participation in tourism in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Thailand it appears that many local people were viewing involvement in tourism as generating net benefits to alleviate poverty rather seeing it as offering empowerment, growth and change in their personal development and the development of their host destinations. Understanding of what chances or prospects might be realised by getting involved would have to happen for the needs and opportunities to be recognised by locals.

There is value in seeing this in the context of national motivations for tourism development. There is a need for wider understanding, not least in terms of *how* and *why* tourism development is “introduced to regions which were previously reliant on different sectors, e.g., resource-based economies in peripheral regions” (Brouder and Eriksson, 2016 as cited in Palmer, 2022:74).

In Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Thailand, despite some sustained increases in international tourism arrivals pre-2020 according to the World Bank (2023), we can recognise notable persistence in geographical inequalities in income and livelihood chances that frustrate inclusive local participation in international tourism. We can also identify attempts to pursue development in line with neo-liberalist theories of economic development and a 'commodified' tourism development paradigm, focused on economic use-value (Wearing et al., 2005) and income generation. However, simultaneously we note the facing of fundamental challenges to transformation through tourism development that relate to inequalities based on identity, ethnicity, race, place of residence, socioeconomic status and community positions – aspects that the United Nations (2020) acknowledge as affecting life chances.

When we look at who is included or excluded in formal opportunities for local participation in tourism (seen here in terms of government and NGO-funded initiatives and in legislative contexts) we note the messiness of attempts to implement community-based tourism in line with social justice goals. Quite simply, the complexity of local disadvantage in developing destinations is such that there are barriers to community involvement that reflect histories, legislative decisions, and socio-cultural identities. Importing Western approaches to development risks overlooking culturally specific norms and societal values that influence local receptivity to different forms of participation (Palmer & Chuamuangphan, 2018).

Speaking of Thailand, Chuamuangphan (2016) acknowledges the power implicated through a First World view of sustainable development and the securing of early economic growth free from social and environmental restraints. He supports the definition and negotiation of sustainable development within local communities in lesser developed nations rather than imposing Western-driven concepts on local communities without consideration of existing values, beliefs, discourses, and imperatives. Our exploration of local participation in

destination development and change in this chapter indicates that further understanding of individualised local experiences is required to enable appreciation of actor behaviours and factors of influence. Westernised understanding of participation may also play a role. There is a need to revisit and extend Tosun's (2000) identification of a participatory development approach as a normative, developed world-driven concept.

Efforts to increase local involvement in tourism development to meet political goals tend to focus on community level initiatives and, to some extent, presuppose and/or are dependent on levels of commitment that individuals have to communities. Yet in respect to the impacts of local participation we identify the propensity for individual benefits to be considered ahead of community-level benefits. These individual benefits appear to be transient, sometimes short-lived, and substitutable, with tourism considered to be an opportunistic secondary livelihood option to supplement household income, certainly for rural residents and/or local people with precarious employment options. It is only when local people's participation in tourism is more established and formalised in terms of career management opportunities that the benefits of collaboration for the wider community and the tourism sector tend to be acknowledged. We note this for example in relation to ethnic Russian Kyrgyz tour operators and Thai tour guides who have organised themselves collectively through lobbying and have formed groups of representatives and professional associations as time has progressed.

Conclusions

Our consideration of local participation in destination development in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia and Thailand has highlighted that there remain questions about the extent to which local participation in tourism may help to achieve a higher commitment to destination

development. In our case examples local participation in tourism has been observed to be closely linked to individual responses to social problems – primarily economic challenges that impact on household income and ways of making a living. Involvement in tourism in all three destinations was most often seen as a ‘means to an end’ in relation to economic survival.

Reflections on individual benefits and impacts are perhaps unsurprising given that “the individual level of economic gain can be easily recognized by local residents” (Jun et al., 2016:3) in contrast to community levels of reward. This tends to mask aspects of commitment that relate to place attachment/loyalty. Our fieldwork observations have revealed that local people will move or migrate from specific localities within countries for work/employment – as we have noted in this chapter in relation to Mongolia but have seen also in our research in Thailand. This mobility raises questions about local level destination and community commitment.

The value that local participation in tourism has for communities in terms of the sharing of a common objective and destination goal is dependent on clear communication about national level development strategies and vision. This has been repeatedly noted to be lacking in Thailand and our experiences of Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia also reveal the absence of shared, collective motivations for involvement in tourism. We can interpret this as highlighting a need to extend Tuohino and Kuno’s (2014) focus on destination development responsibilities and level of leadership in terms of the management of tourism development. Absence of a clearly communicated shared goal may frustrate community level commitment to destination development, especially in destinations where local people have traditionally experienced high levels of state direction and organisation. Communication gaps may create space between policy-driven destination development inputs and desired change.

We have previously noted that in respect to Mongolia there remains:

“a lack of understanding of local reactions to development processes and outcomes and the concepts of procedural justice and distributive justice from the perspective of community.” (Dorjsuren & Palmer, 2018:81).

We extend this observation to Kyrgyzstan and Thailand also and note implications for exploring commitment to destination development as well as equity in tourism development. The extent to which local engagement and participation aligns with commitment to destination development is questionable and requires further exploration.

The idea that local community participation is critical to tourism development *per se* and vital to sustainable tourism development assumes a link between local involvement and destination development. However, the way in which destination development is understood and the extent to which it is open to challenge inevitably impacts on the measurement of levels of commitment towards it.

Through our exploration of local participation in tourism development in Kyrgyzstan, Mongolia, and Thailand we have found that it is notoriously difficult to quantify involvement and commitment. Furthermore, we have noted that there is value in qualifying this. There is a need for better understanding of how and why locals are involved in tourism and how this links to destination development commitment. It is through individual stories of lived experiences and plurality of perspectives that we might develop a deeper understanding of how local participation may or may not produce a higher commitment to destination development.

<p>This chapter is relevant to future sustainable destination development as it prompts the unsettling of Western-focused assumptions on how and why local participation in tourism relates to commitment and the continued development of destinations. It emphasises value in</p>

extending in-depth qualitative explorations of geographical case contexts that embrace insider perspectives and consider the position of researchers against the researched. It also indicates that there is a need to take a more critical approach to tourism development analyses. Deeper understanding of the multiple and nuanced perspectives of local stakeholders and their motivations for becoming and staying involved (or not) in tourism can offer more realistic, meaningful, and effective attempts to secure local buy-in. This is especially valuable in rural areas where tourism development initiatives focus on community-based ideals and are dependent on 'buy-in'. The chapter illustrates how there is a need to reflect on the meaning and value that tourism has for local community members. There is a need to be able to explicate further the notion of local participation and consider what factors that enable inclusion and exclusion might look like through the eyes of local communities. This needs to be appreciated if policymakers and destination development managers are to leverage sufficient levels of commitment to common objectives and destination goals to realise development strategies and vision. When we speak of achieving commitment, we should acknowledge engagement with clearly communicated shared goals and values. In the context of a destination as opposed to an organisation, having shared goals is problematic. A lot of effort, time and money is expended on consultation exercises that most often end in compromise at best and disengagement or conflict at worst. Accordingly, we encourage questioning the relevance and implications of attempts to implement participatory approaches to development in relation to future-focused destination development.

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