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Community-based Tourism in Nicaragua: A Socio-Cultural Perspective

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Despite criticism, community-based tourism continues to be considered as a promising strategy for sustainable development and poverty reduction. In practice, the planning and evaluation of even supposedly responsible tourism initiatives, has concentrated upon rapid economic and environmental impacts. This article contributes to the discussion surrounding community-based tourism by analyzing the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development in economically marginalized rural areas. It draws attention to the well-being of those being visited by bringing together the cultural studies of tourism and studies of development. This research paper comprises an ethnographic field study in three coffee cultivating communities in San Ramón, Northern Nicaragua. In these communities, it was found that the young tourist guides and the women responsible for the accommodation have enjoyed new opportunities to participate in the tourism process through newly gained contacts, knowledge, skills and confidence. The results of the study support the assumption that the real essence of rural community-based tourism can be seen in its potential to promote people's control over those factors that affect their daily lives.

Keywords: community-based tourism, socio-cultural, development, sustainability, Nicaragua

During recent decades, community-based tourism has been increasingly perceived as a promising strategy for sustainable development and poverty reduction. Those in support, emphasize the fairness, solidarity, community control, participation and the equal distribution of benefits in this kind of tourism development. (Ashley & Roe, 1998, p. 10; D'Mello, 2008; Hall & Richards, 2006; Fagence, 2003; Shen, Hughey & Simmons, 2008; Singh, Timothy & Dowling, 2003; Telfer, 2002; Tosun, 2000.) Nicaragua is a good example of a less economically developed country (LEDC) where the national governments and various international development organizations have

chosen to promote tourism as a tool for sustainable community development (Cañada & Gascón, 2007a, p. 18–19; Höckert, 2009, p. 9, 27; Zapata, Hall, Lindo & Vanderschaeghe, 2011).

At the same time, the interdependency between tourism and multi-dimensions of poverty remains understudied (Carlisle, 2010, p. 69; de Kadt 1979; Kalisch, 2010, p. 90; Palomo Pérez, 2003a, 2003b; Tassone & Van der Duim, 2010; Viswanath, 2008, p. 43) and various counter-arguments have questioned the responsible nature of community-based tourism. Critics view this kind of tourism as more likely to cause dependency than empowerment and comment how small scale tourism development includes only a minimal possibility for economic growth (Mitchell & Muckosy, 2008, p. 102; PEMCE, 2008, p. 7; Pleumarom, 2002 cited Wild, 2008, p. 73; Rocha, 2008). It has also been pointed out how community-based tourism initiatives tend to suffer from low-life expectancy (Zapata et al, 2011) and it is asked whether the ‘new’ models of moral tourism actually offer more sustainable alternatives to the conventional forms of mass tourism (Butcher, 2003; Mowforth & Munt, 2003, p. 91).

It is obvious that values and definition of development play a central role when assessing the success and failure of tourism development initiatives. In fact, analyses can yield contradictory findings according to the perspectives held of the role that tourism holds in the destination location (Mowforth, Charlton & Munt, 2008; Wall & Mathieson, 2006, p. 21). While it would be challenging to find tourism development strategies or project documents which do not claim to promote ‘sustainable development’, the practical discourse around community-based tourism seems to lack a holistic view on this issue. Many examples taken from Nicaragua support the argument of Shen et al. (2008, p. 8), of tourism being repeatedly treated as one of the ‘productive’ rural sectors and which oversimplifies the complexity of tourism development. This refers to a tendency to measure the benefits of community-based tourism only in economic terms and in understanding the demands of sustainability as a need to mitigate the environmental costs entailed. Even though the importance of tourism profitability cannot be denied, too often the larger context of tourism is dismissed when the economic motive overrules other essential reasons for tourism development (Fennell & Przeclawski, 2004, p. 144; Richter, 2001, p. 289).

Whereas tourism practitioners often fail to acknowledge the human impacts of tourism, the scholars typically present socio-cultural changes in a negative light. Sometimes there seems to exist a nearly paternalistic desire to protect the host communities’ daily life from tourism which poses a considerable barrier to the potential positive and desirable consequences that tourism development can bring. (Deery, Jago & Fredline, 2011, 2; Fagence, 2003, p. 55; Hashimoto, 2002, p. 213-213; Swarbrooke, 2002, p. 69, 71.) The role of income and wealth as related to tourism development however, should be integrated into a broader and fuller picture of success and deprivation (see Sen, 1999). This means that the human dimensions of development, such as freedom of choice, social justice and empowerment, all deserve more attention in our tourism worlds (Cole, 2006; Hashimoto, 2002, p. 202, 218; Pritchard, Morgan & Ateljevic, 2011; Scheyvens, 1999; 2002; Tassone & Van der Duim, 2010, p. 18; Wall & Mathieson, 2006, p. 286).

In this article, community-based tourism is understood primarily to be an approach where the well-being of the local communities is viewed as being the starting point and tourism perceived as one of the possible instruments by which to promote it. The main criteria of this kind of tourism are the opportunities of local communities to have a high degree of control over activities taking place, usage of local resources and distribution of benefits from tourism development. (See Postma, 2002 in McGettigan, Burns & Candon 2006, p. 155; Saarinen, 2006; Tosun, 2000; Scheyvens, 1999; 2002.) The purpose of this paper is to contribute to the conversation concerning the possibilities and challenges of community-based tourism development in rural areas in LECDs. This is achieved by bringing together cultural studies of tourism and studies of development. Specifically, the socio-cultural impacts of tourism development are analysed from the rural communities' standpoint. This research entails an ethnographic fieldwork study of three coffee cultivating communities in San Ramón, in the northern highlands of Nicaragua. The idea for a tourism programme called the Fair Trade Coffee Trail was born following the global coffee price crisis in the beginning of 21st century. The main objectives of the programme were to bring complementary income to the poor coffee farmers, to promote equal participation inside the communities and to create new contacts with the Fair Trade coffee consumers in the Global North.

The growing trend of rural tourism in Nicaragua

Nicaragua receives approximately one million international visitors per year, which lifts tourism as the country's primary source of foreign income with coffee (INTUR, 2010). At the same time Nicaragua continues to be one of the poorest countries in Latin America where levels of inequality and social exclusion remain high (PNDH, 2008, p. 116; UNDP, 2007, p. 283, Sistema de las Naciones Unidas, 2007, p. 13). On one hand, the problems caused by the continuous invasion of the luxury resorts of residential and enclave tourism on the Pacific coast of the country, have provoked demands for more responsible forms of tourism. On the other hand, community-based tourism is seen as a unique opportunity for marginalized groups to participate in the process of tourism development and to be free from the hegemonic grasp of outside tour operators. (See Bonilla & Mordt, 2008, 2011; Cañada & Merodio, 2004; Cañada & Gascón 2007b, p. 73–75; Maldonado, 2005, p. 14; Mowforth et al., 2008, 86–89; Timothy & Tosun, 2003, p. 185.) Consequently the concept of *rural community-based tourism* (turismo rural comunitario) has been adapted to describe small scale tourism in rural areas, where the local communities have a possibility to control and benefit from tourism development. In only a short period of time, rural community-based tourism has become a relevant form of development in different parts of Nicaragua, as organizations of communities, farmer families, indigenous groups and handicraft associations have started (and notably been helped to start) different kinds of tourism initiatives throughout the country (Cañada & Gascón, 2007a, p. 18–19; RENITURAL, 2008).

The basic principles of rural community-based tourism in Latin America are listed in the Declaration of San José (2003). According to the declaration, this type of tou-

rism development should be socially and environmentally responsible, economically viable, and directed to enrich the culture. It also states that the main goal of rural community-based tourism is to reduce income poverty, vulnerability and isolation by diversifying and not by replacing the traditional income sources of rural communities. In general, the real area of promise is seen in tourism's possibilities to create new job alternatives in rural areas and to ensure that the farmers' land will not be sold to external investors (Bonilla & Mordt, 2011; Cañada et. al., 2006; Cañada & Gascón, 2007, p. 73–75; Maldonado, 2005, p. 14; Telfer, 2006, p. 242–245).

In general it seems that these kinds of rural tourism initiatives proceed only rarely as an unplanned intervention of the free market process, but more often as a planned programme that is part of a local or regional development strategy. In Nicaragua, the strong presence of official development assistance (UNDP, 2007, p. 292) and the government's interest to support local tourism enterprises (INTUR 2010; PNDH, 2008, p. 188), has led to a situation whereby the majority of 'local' tourism initiatives have actually been both founded and funded by external actors (Höckert, 2009, p. 9; Zapata et al., 2011, p. 727). An excellent and comprehensive recent comparative study from Nicaragua by Zapata, Hall, Lindo and Vanderschaeghe (2011) demonstrates how the 'bottom-up' local tourism projects directed towards the domestic market have come to reap faster and more sustainable benefits than those top-down strategies implemented by international development agencies, so reflecting a predominance of neo-liberal values. This supports those previous studies of community-based tourism which argue that there exists a clear difference between tourism development initiated in the local community and those projects started and financed by external actors (see Barnett, 2008, p. 38; Burns, 2004, p. 25; van der Duim, 2007).

Conceptual framework of socio-cultural sustainability

When a growing number of actors promote development through tourism, it is crucial to acknowledge that the concept of development as such, is artificial, vague and has emerged from a Eurocentric thinking led by economic models (see de Vylder, 2006, p. 26; Easterly, 2006, 21; Escobar, 1997, p. 86, 90; Sachs, 2001; Swantz, 2009, 29). Chambers (in Hettne, 1990, p. 9) has described the progress of development theories and practices by saying "It is alarming how wrong we were and how sure we were that we were right". Slowly it has been learned that economic growth does not contribute to development if it does not translate to the social change and increased capability to function of the poor. The latest alternative development paradigms emphasize small scale, locally owned, human development and place the well-being of people in the centre of development initiatives (de Vylder, 2006; Edwards, 2004; Sen, 1999).

Socio-cultural impacts are connected to the concepts of 'people impacts' or 'livelihood impacts' and emerge in the form of changed human behaviour (Ashley, Roe & Goodwin, 2001, p. 23; Wall & Mathieson, 2006, p. 19; Wolf, 1977). This means that the emphasis is not on the environmental or financial consequences of tourism, but placed instead on the less studied areas of social and human capital and cultural values. A socio-cultural approach includes factors such as well-being, value systems, attitudes, behavioural patterns, education and skill base, cultural heritage,

creative expression, intercultural understanding, social structure, equity, participation and empowerment (Cooper, Fletcher, Fyall, Gilbert & Wanhill, 2005, p. 262; Fox, 1977, 27; Ratz, 2006). By example, whilst tourism development can reinforce cultural understanding and local pride, it can also cause a loss of cultural identity and create conflict inside the host community. These kinds of impacts of tourism linger and interact with each other and are linked to a number of other agents of change that influence the destination. (Wall & Mathieson, 2006, 19–21). The socio-cultural consequences caused by tourism usually occur slowly over time and are largely invisible and intangible, yet the social changes are normally permanent (Swarbrooke, 2002, p. 69).

Although sustainable development should be approached in a holistic manner (e.g. Saarinen, 2006), the division of a triple bottom line of sustainability helps us to notice the whole variety of consequences that tourism development can cause (Höckert, 2009, p. 28). It has become evident how thoughtful consideration and assessment of potential socio-cultural impacts, should be included in all kinds of tourism initiatives – even in those supposedly more sustainable and responsible forms. In the context of community-based tourism, the crucial starting point is to understand the local context of tourism development, in terms of the community characteristics and local knowledge, the state and type of tourism development, the host-guest relationship and the intermediaries' role in the destination area (Höckert, 2009; Wall & Mathieson, 2006).

Sustainability has been perceived as a baseline, meaning that tourism development should not be harmful to the local communities. Linked to this, the term of carrying capacity has been used to indicate the volume of visitors that can be received before the host community's society and culture begins to be irreversibly affected (Swarbrooke, 2002, p. 261–262). It seems that these kinds of concepts draw attention primarily to the negative impacts of tourism and Wall and Mathieson (2006, p. 52) have stated how even the word 'impact' has come to have a negative connotation. Congruently, the existing tourism and rural development techniques of impact assessment seem to concentrate mainly on the problems and leave out those possible beneficial impacts that could be promoted. However, in order to promote sustainable solutions of tourism, tourism should be socio-culturally beneficial to local people.

Without ignoring the issues of economic, social and cultural diversity, it should be possible to define certain core values that can be universally acknowledged. In this study, the conceptual framework of socio-cultural sustainability was constructed around the idea that the central human values of self-esteem and freedom of choice can be seen as both means and goals of sustainable tourism development. Here, the basic value of freedom of choice is a principal determinant of individual initiative and social effectiveness. A greater freedom of choice enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence their world which is central to the process of development. The value of self-esteem can be connected to the development objective of raising the standard of living. This means that higher incomes, jobs, education, and a greater attention to cultural and human values, all generate greater individual and collective self-esteem. (Sen 1999; Todaro & Smith, 2006, p. 20–24.)

In summary, socio-culturally sustainable community-based tourism should:

- Support equal participation and the fair distribution of benefits;
- Promote community ownership and control;
- Promote awareness surrounding the local populations own rights;
- Promote knowledge, new skills and confidence;
- Create new contacts;
- Respect cultural differences and foster intercultural understanding;
- Promote the cultural heritage and the pride of the local communities;
- Lead to individual and community empowerment.

The underlying assumption of local participation is that people should be actively involved and given the opportunity to shape their own destiny, instead of simply having the role of passive recipients of the fruits of development programs (Sen, 1999). Paradoxically, a principle of local participation implies, that very often local people have been left out of the planning and decision-making of tourism development (Mowforth & Munt, 2003, p. 212). This research uses Pretty's (1995) typology of participation in order to understand and determine the ways in which the local people participate in tourism development. Pretty's six types of participation range from the first level of passive participation, at which people are told what has already been decided and what has happened, to the sixth level of self-mobilization, in which people have full control and take initiative as well as developing contacts independently.

In development literature, participation is connected regularly to the importance of empowerment. It is assumed that even though the development projects are normally planned to last only a certain time, empowerment can guarantee the continuity of the development. Conventionally, empowerment is considered to be the answer to poverty and social exclusion (Edwards, 2005, p. 228) and community-based tourism embraces the possibility of supporting the local people to take advantages of further opportunities, as they present themselves (Hatton, 1999, p. 5; McGettigan et al., 2006, p. 151). At the same time, many authors claim that the concept of empowerment is also in great risk of becoming just another empty buzzword, or that real empowerment exists only at the rhetorical level (Richards & Hall, 2006, p. 303; Wearing & McDonald, 2002, p. 202). This criticism is warmly welcomed, as it reminds us how it is not safe to presume that all kinds of participation in tourism activities, will automatically lead to the empowerment.

Figure 1 outlines the relationship between main concepts of socio-cultural sustainability applied in this study. It also demonstrates how external tourism developers cannot directly enhance poverty reduction or empowerment without understanding the local context, local knowledge and the different aspects of tourism on people. In this conceptual framework, Cole's (2006) and Scheyvens' (1999; 2002) approaches of empowerment through tourism development are brought together (see Timothy & Tosun, 2003). The justification for this choice lays in the fact that these authors have indirectly included the aspects of social and human capital as well as cultural values, to their definitions of empowerment. Scheyvens (1999) has divided empowerment into economic, political, social and psychological types of empowerment. In this

study the socio-cultural analysis is limited to the psychological and social types of empowerment at the individual and community level.

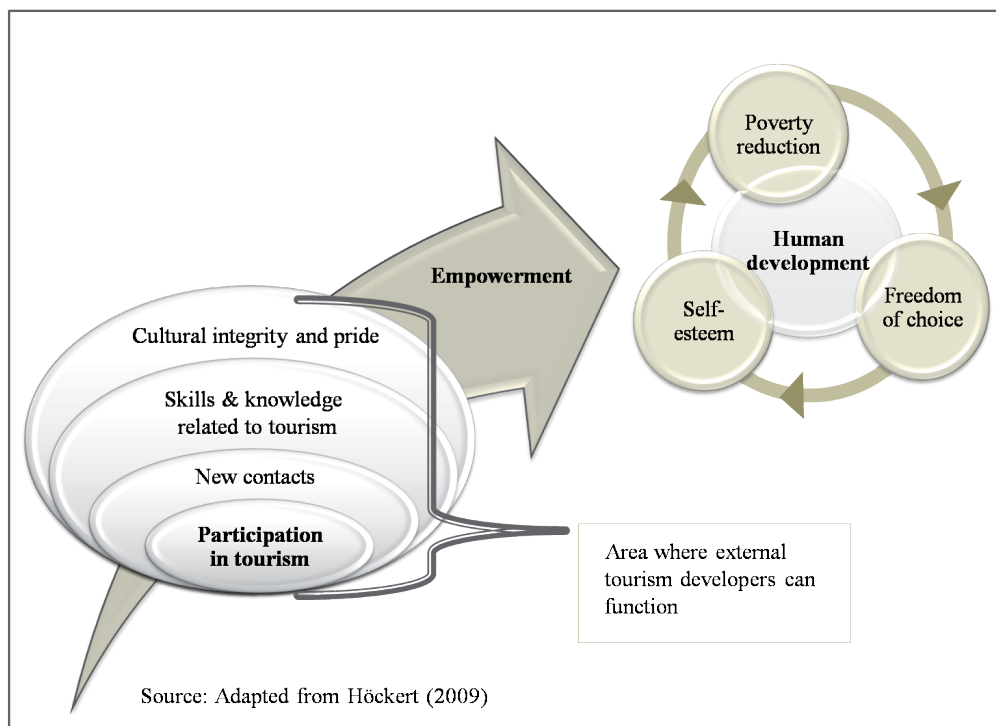


Figure 1. The role of socio-cultural aspects of tourism in sustainable development

Ethnographic fieldwork in San Ramón, Nicaragua

The empirical data was collected during four weeks of fieldwork in September – October 2008 in three coffee cultivating communities of San Ramón: *El Roblar*, *La Corona* and *La Pita*. During this time I lived with local families and gathered ethnographic data through semi-structured interviews, participatory observation and field notes (see Bloor & Wood, 2006, p. 71; Kvale, 1996; Heyl, 2001 p. 369–375). The fieldwork included a total of 23 interviews, of which five were conducted in groups and the remainder as individual interviews. The interviewees can be divided into three main groups; those accommodating tourists (men and women), young tourist guides and those people in the communities that had not been directly involved with the tourism project. In addition, a group working with sexual health and gender equity were interviewed during their visit to one of the communities.

In this context it is central to understand the argument of post-colonialist feminist Mohanty (1999), of how Western feminism has tended to gloss over the differences between Southern women. Mohanty states that Western feminist discourse constructs a category of the ‘Third World woman’ as a monolithic subject. It is often described that women in LEDCs have ‘needs’ and ‘problems’, but few if any have ‘choices’ or ‘the freedom to act’. (Mohanty, 1999). As an ethnographic researcher I have had

to acknowledge that I am a Finnish woman analyzing cultural and social changes in another cultural context (see Scheyvens & Storey, 2003). Since I was accustomed to using a certain kind of cultural framework, it was important to learn how to distance myself from it. During this learning process I found Friberg's (1999, p. 148) following questions to be very valuable: a) How much of what I believe is nothing more than a package of ideas that I have unconsciously taken in from my own culture? b) To what extent am I prepared to regard the ideas and values of other groups as equally valid as mine? c) Is it even possible to use ideas and norms which have been developed in my own culture and apply them to other groups?

In this study, the interviews were based on open questions about the tourism programme and about the changes it had brought at individual, family and community levels. In addition to these questions, I also used more specific questions to facilitate and support the interview process (Kvale, 1996). These questions were categorized by using existing information about the possible socio-cultural impacts caused by tourism. The categories were; community and social capital, work, gender equality, new skills, self-esteem, cultural heritage, cultural exchange, and values and behaviour. I felt that these types of pre-constructed category would not prevent new ideas, whilst they were used to support the open questions being used and to retrieve further information on the topics that informants themselves had already mentioned. The interviews were supported by participatory observation and field notes were used to aid in the understanding and comprehension of issues, such as the context of the interviews and characteristics of the community. Newspaper articles, programme memos, pamphlets and web pages of different Nicaraguan authorities and organizations were used as secondary sources of information for this study. An important secondary source was the UCA San Ramón's (2008) project proposal document to the UNDP's Small Grant Program (SGP). Following the fieldwork, the data was organized and analyzed by means of categorization and qualitative content analysis (see Eskola, 2001; Fagence, 2003, p. 74–75; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

Significance of tourism to the hosts

The international solidarity movement followed by the Revolution in 1979 and the Contra war in the 1980's, had brought the first foreign visitors to the communities of San Ramón, in northern Nicaragua. At this point tourism had not yet been organized at any level and as one of the informants described; these visitors were '*attended as friends – not as tourists*'. The first guests had brought their own food and stayed with the families of the community for free. They expressed an interest in helping the communities and also to learn about the Nicaraguan socialist revolution and about the new coffee cooperatives. These types of visits and different forms of unofficial help stopped however, when the Sandinistas lost the election in 1990.

Between the years 1998 and 2001 small farm households in particular suffered the most from the global coffee crisis (Vakis, Kruger & Mason, 2004; Valkila & Nygren, 2009). The idea for a more organized form of tourism development in San Ramón was born in order to bring complementary income and new opportunities in which women and young people could participate. The idea was originally introduced to the

communities by the *Central of Coffee Cooperatives in the North* (CECOCAFEN) and the local cooperative union *UCA San Ramón*, as well as being supported by international Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). In the beginning, reactions towards the idea varied greatly. Rather than people being afraid of the negative impacts of tourism, many people simply did not have prior experience of being a tourist nor knowledge about the applied concept of the western tourism industry (see Ashley et al., 2001; Cañada & Merodio, 2004, p. 8; Cole, 2006, p. 99; Tosun, 2000). Following a visit to an established community-based tourism initiative, approximately five to eight families from each community decided to commit themselves to the provision and running of tourism accommodation and young people were chosen to work as tourist guides.

In the poorest countries, it is the women and children who are more likely to suffer from poverty and deprivation (Todaro & Smith, 2006, p. 227) and the rural areas of Nicaragua are no exception (UNDP, 2011; Sistema de las Naciones Unidas, 2006). Although the men traditionally represent the families in the rural areas of Nicaragua (Sistema de las Naciones Unidas, 2006), the women were encouraged to take a more active role in tourism activities. One participant told how she had lost her right to be a cooperative member almost twenty years ago after she had her first child, but with tourism development she had been able to become more active in her community:

Before I could not be part of almost anything. But when the coffee price went down my husband came and asked if I would like to start to work as a lodger for the tourists; I said Yes! And now I was able to go to official meetings and workshops and trainings with the other women. Before I had never been able to do that! I have been also able to visit few other communities when we have gone to the workshops.

Many similar stories from San Ramón show how the tourism development can enhance the self-identity of those involved by specifying their clear association (see Davidson, 2005, p. 26). Despite a number of conflicts and even separations, the majority of the informants experienced that there had been significant progress towards a more equal participation and decision making process inside both the communities and the families. One of the young male guides considered that:

"Now the young men already know and understand that the women can go by themselves. Tourism has changed this some as the Nicaraguans have seen that the culture can be different too."

The tourism programme was officially started in 2003 and named as *Agro-Ecoturismo Comunitario* (Community-based Agro-ecotourism). In particular, the women and guides committed to the tourism programme had started to receive different forms of training in order to be able to receive the visitors. Although many families and guides had felt nervous and awkward with the first 'official' tourists, most of the people became more confident and started to enjoy the tourists' visits. Nearly all the informants of this study expressed the importance of programme participants learning new skills, receiving information about the visitors' culture and creating proper physical conditions in order to make the tourism programme more successful (see Fennell & Przeclawski, 2003). In general, better knowledge about tourism, new con-

tacts and their positive new experiences had helped the women and the young guides to feel more secure about themselves and this in-turn led to increase their feelings of self-esteem and psychological empowerment (see Scheyvens, 1999, p. 247—249). Following Cole's (2006) and Scheyvens (1999) arguments about empowerment in tourism; it can be claimed that the without the associated capacity building and new skills provision related to tourism, this kind of tourism development could in fact have lead to disempowerment – even though the local people were participating in tourism development.

In the tourism communities of San Ramón the tourists stay in local homes prepared for the use of the visitors. Most of the international tourists arrive in San Ramón interested in meeting the 'faces behind the coffee cup', experiencing the everyday routines of the families and to learn about Fair Trade and organic coffee cultivation. In general, the encounters between locals and tourists had been mainly positive and the common negative impacts of conventional mass tourism such as the increase in undesirable activities (drugs, alcohol, crime or prostitution) or the employment of non-locals had not appeared. However, the tourism intermediaries' and national and regional tourists' comments and complains about 'too rustic accommodation' had awakened feelings of relative deprivation among the hosts. These kinds of experiences can easily lead to a demonstration effect and require the hosts to make new investments at the expense of much needed community services. (See Fagence, 2003, p. 73; Swarbrooke, 2002, p. 73-74.)

Even though tourism had caused feelings of relative deprivation, one of the young guides summarized most of the hosts' feelings by saying;

Thanks to the tourism, we Nicaraguans have learned to value what we have here!

The visitors' interest towards local traditions, coffee trails, agricultural production, flora, fauna, community centres, churches and schools had increased also, the local people's recognition of the cultural and natural assets of their home area, which had again strengthened cultural and social traditions (see Ashley & Roe, 1998). One of the guides asserted how the tourists' requirements for better conditions should not change the local agricultural reality and how tourism should be seen more as a source of extra income. It seems that even though the tourists and some of the donors had been complaining about simple conditions, the local people had felt that they had still much to offer.

Although the economic profits from tourism had been relatively small, the young guides felt they were important and that the new skills they had learned with the programme had importance that went beyond the tourism initiative. For instance, in one community two female guides had been in a leading role, organizing a new 'cooperative of young people'. Tourism had also promoted the young guides' confidence to seek out further education opportunities, which serves as a clear sign of their psychological empowerment (see Scheyvens, 1999, p. 247). This and other socio-cultural impacts of tourism development in San Ramón are summarized in Table 1. The results of the analysis are divided into groups according to different factors increasing or restricting empowerment through tourism development: new contacts, new skills, awareness and confidence, cultural integrity and pride.

Table 1. Socio-cultural significance of tourism in the communities of San Ramón (Source: Höckert, 2009, p. 102)

Socio-cultural significance	Individual level People in the tourism programme	Community level Everybody	Future challenges
New contacts	+/- Intercultural exchange of information, ideas and experiences with tourists + Visiting peer groups/ other communities working with tourism +/- Financial and capacity building support from the intermediaries - Powerlessness when only the intermediaries can contact the potential tourists	+ Coffee consumers from the Global North + Children playing with the tourists - Most people have no contacts with tourists - Irritation when tourists enter the communities without local guides	? Bring more tourists ? Include more people ? Reduce the dependency of the intermediaries ? To control the intrusive intermediaries and guests
New skills, awareness and confidence	+ Awareness of one's rights -> improved ability to claim them + Knowledge about tourism and hospitality -> confidence + Women: cooking, recycling paper, natural medicines, social skills + Guides: English, social skills, new plans for studying, leadership + Knowledge about local culture, history, geography & nature	+ Improved awareness of gender equality + Children studying English with volunteers + People taking better care of nature and keeping the community cleaner + Folkloric dance and music groups	? Gain a better understanding of the Fair Trade ? Improve English ? Improved sanitation and filtered water also for the families, not only for the tourists
Cultural integrity and pride	+ Young guides: greater respect and value towards work and life of their community - plans to stay + People in the project more proud to present their life, community and coffee cultivation than before -Relative deprivation when visitors and intermediaries complain about the conditions	+ Revival of folkloric dance - Difficulties to see their community as a tourism attraction + Reduced isolation when the community gets more known	? More people to enjoy the tourism facilities ? To prevent the feelings of relative deprivation and negative demonstration effects

Utopia of a host community

After the promising start, these communities of San Ramón were considered as some of the main pioneers of community-based tourism in Nicaragua. The rapid progress of tourism has been facilitated by the active role of the cooperative unions, several development aid organizations and the international NGOs which had been funding and implementing small initiatives related to tourism and also offering participants micro-loans in order to improve their homes for the tourists. In 2007 however, as the tourism conditions had become better and the families and guides felt well-prepared to receive visitors, the amount of visitors had notably declined. The external support had withdrawn (at least at that time) and the cooperative union's coordination had weakened. It was therefore obvious that in this case, tourism development was not based in the local communities' control. At the time of the fieldwork in 2008, the people of these communities felt themselves to be powerless, as they had very little comment to express whether they felt the project would continue to decline or rejuvenate (see Scheyvens, 1999, p. 247). The loans taken out for tourism development however, still had to be paid. This stagnation of tourism development shows how tourism can create difficult dependency relations between the hosts and intermediaries and how easily new initiatives weaken after the withdrawal of the external support (see Burns, 2004, p. 23; Höckert, 2009, p. 24, 103; Zapata et al., 2011; van der Duim et al., 2007, p. 109–110; Viswanath, 2008, p. 47).

Despite all the attractive guidelines for community participation in tourism, the concept of a host community is very complex and overused and often invokes a false sense of tradition, homogeneity and consensus (Poppo, 2000, p. 2-4; Singh et al., 2003, p. 8; Swarbrooke, 2002, p. 129). Without ignoring the criticism; as a researcher, I have followed Brunt's (2001, p. 90) statement how community can provide as good a context as any, even if that community was merely imagined. Thus it is important in the community context to acknowledge what kind of context the community really is. In this study, the three communities of San Ramón can be understood as being three separate populations, residing in a local area which has common social characteristics and goals (see Richards & Hall, 2006, 302). These communities are geographically restricted areas where all of the population can be potentially affected by tourism, yet where all of the people are by no means hosts. A special characteristic of the local context in San Ramón is how it was mainly the families of cooperative members that had been allowed to join the tourism development initiative. When comparing the beginning of tourism development in San Ramón to Pretty's (1995) six-point typology of participation, it can be seen that majority of people participated in the programme, merely by being informed or consulted about its development. The fragmentation of the communities along the lines of cooperative membership and a lack of transparency in the planning and management of the tourism development had led to some hard feeling between the hosts and others in the communities. Some of my informants referred to themselves as outsiders expressing:

The bad thing is that they have their view-points, or whatever there, but they have never invited us to come to visit there. These things are just for them and for tourists.

Timothy (1999 in Shen et al., 2008, p.7) points out that participation should be viewed from at least two perspectives in the tourism development process, namely 'participation in decision-making process' and 'tourism benefits sharing'. It seems that in San Ramón those people who had not officially committed to the tourism programme had not been able to participate in making decisions, nor enjoy the direct positive impacts from tourism. This also shows a mainly naive and romantic perception of community-based tourism, that everyone in the community would have equal access to power, representation and benefits (Hall, 2003, p. 103).

Although tourism had not significantly altered communities' social capital through social empowerment (see Scheyvens, 1999, p. 248), it must be mentioned that there had been other indirect benefits of tourism such as the mutual responsibility of keeping the environment cleaner, people being able to participate in cultural performances and foreign volunteers teaching the children English. In addition, many of the non-host members of the community thought that tourism had decreased the isolation of the coffee communities in a positive manner, as the *Fair Trade Coffee Trail* had become more famous in Nicaragua and also abroad.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to participate in the debate surrounding the possibilities of rural communities' to reap benefits from tourism. Without denying the importance of economic benefits, the interconnection between tourism, development and poverty must be understood well beyond economic growth. This advocates a need to move the focus of tourism research and practices more towards human values and the well-being of those being visited. Although the search for responsible forms of tourism has mirrored the themes of the alternative development approach, tourism literature only vaguely acknowledges the overriding development paradigms (Telfer, 2003, p. 155; 2009). In fact, theorizing about development continues to be a never ending task that deserves more serious consideration in tourism research (Telfer, 2003; 2009).

The research undertaken has provided information primarily about the socio-cultural impacts of tourism in communities of San Ramón, and secondly about the special character of community-based tourism that can be applied to a wider context. In the communities of San Ramón, tourism had widened some people's freedom of choice and self-esteem, both of which can be considered to be essential values in human development. This study supports the idea that community-based tourism can provide significant socio-cultural benefits to the local people, particularly at the individual level. Especially in marginalized rural areas, the real essence of this kind of tourism can be seen in its potential to support the hosts to take advantage of further opportunities – in other words to support empowerment (see Hatton, 1995, 5; Scheyvens, 1999).

While cherishing some of the positive messages from the coffee communities of Nicaragua, it is essential to notice that there are no universal models of tourism that can guarantee success, poverty reduction and the equal distribution of benefits. This means that community-based tourism is not suitable to be directly copied as a model,

since tourism developments are very situational and the potential and interest for local involvement varies a great deal from place to place (Cañada & Gascón, 2007b, 74). Although tourism researchers have widely agreed that hosts can benefit from tourism only when they are accepted as agents of their own development (Shen et al., p. 7; Wild, 2008, p. 74, cf. Li, 2006), it seems that even supposedly sustainable models of tourism have not significantly altered local communities' standpoint from objects of tourism to controllers of tourism (see Mowforth et al., 2008, p. 71; Saarinen, 2010). Unfortunately the appealing goals of locally owned development, community participation and of empowerment have a tendency to become just empty buzzwords when the tourism developers enter rural areas without prior full understanding about the local realities or about the interconnection between tourism and rural community development. This study has looked to explain how even so called responsible tourism initiatives are in great risk to fail when external tourism developers overlook the local context and the significance of socio-cultural factors in tourism. In other words tourism will offer only minimal contribution to sustainable poverty reduction as long as the social force of tourism remains undervalued (see Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006).

I consider that the idea of community-based tourism contains what Barnett (2008, p. 35) calls the humanitarian solidarity of tourism; when everything goes well, tourism can prove a beneficial tool for community empowerment and effect a genuine exchange of cultural understanding. However, in-light of the different challenges shadowing the otherwise novel idea of community-based tourism, there is revealed a growing need to question the authority relationship between tourism developers and local communities, and to find new ways to promote social inclusion through and within tourism development. Rather than imagining the tourism and development worlds without external actors, the future challenge entails the need to find more sustainable ways of supporting local contacts, skills, knowledge and cultural pride inside the host communities.

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