COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM
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THE CONCEPT OF COMMUNITY TOURISM

There are different definitions of community tourism with strong similarities and some differences which probably originate from diverse sensitivities and experiences gained in specific contexts. However, all things considered, we are talking about nuances, of underscoring rather than actual differences.

Let's begin with the definition of Tourism Concern, an historical and distinguished British organisation involved in reviewing tourism and spreading the ideas of responsible tourism (www.tourismconcern.org)

Tourism that benefits local people
Community tourism (sometimes called community-based tourism) is a form of tourism which aims to include and benefit local communities, particularly indigenous peoples and villagers in the rural South (i.e. 'developing world'). For instance, villagers might host tourists in their village, managing the scheme communally and sharing the profits. There are many types of community tourism project, including many in which the 'community' works with a commercial tour operator, but all community tourism projects should give local people a fair share of the benefits/profits and a say in deciding how incoming tourism is managed.

Community tourism should...

- Be run with the involvement and consent of local communities. (Local people should participate in planning and managing the tour.)
- Give a fair share of profits back to the local community. (Ideally this will include community projects (health, schools, etc.).)
- Involve communities rather than individuals. (Working with individuals can disrupt social structures.)
- Be environmentally sustainable. (Local people must be involved if conservation projects are to succeed.)
- Respect traditional culture and social structures.
- Have mechanisms to help communities cope with the impact of western tourists.
- Keep groups small to minimise cultural / environmental impact.
- Brief tourists before the trip on appropriate behaviour.
- Not make local people perform inappropriate ceremonies, etc.
- Leave communities alone if they don't want tourism. (People should have the right to say 'no' to tourism.)
As can be seen in this definition, the important aspects of community tourism can be summarised as such:

1. The role of the local community in deciding the programming and managing of the tourism – the community can also decide to not accept tourism.
2. A fair economic return for the community, also in terms of support for projects of a collective nature.
3. Environmental sustainability of the tourism, also in hosting small groups.
4. Respect for traditional culture and social organisation.
5. Protecting the local community from external impacts which could be reduced also by suitably preparing the tourist for the trip.
6. No to the folklorisation and trivialisation of the local culture and lifestyle.

Let’s now look at the definition provided by responsibletravel.com, a British portal very well-known and accepted in responsible tourism (www.responsibletravel.com):

A community by definition implies individuals with some kind of collective responsibility, and the ability to make decisions by representative bodies.

Community based tourism is tourism in which local residents (often rural, poor and economically marginalised) invite tourists to visit their communities with the provision of overnight accommodation. The residents earn income as land managers, entrepreneurs, service and produce providers, and employees. At least part of the tourist income is set aside for projects which provide benefits to the community as a whole.

Community based tourism enables the tourist to discover local habitats and wildlife, and celebrates and respects traditional cultures, rituals and wisdom. The community will be aware of the commercial and social value placed on their natural and cultural heritage through tourism, and this will foster community based conservation of these resources.

The tourist accommodation and facilities will be of sufficient standard for Western visitors, albeit those expecting simple rural accommodation. The community will be required to have continuous access to a phone (which might be required for medical assistance) and daily access to email (which will be required by operators to confirm bookings).

The community may choose to partner with a private sector partner to provide capital, clients, marketing, tourist accommodation or other expertise. Subject to agreement to the ideals of supporting community development and conservation, and
to planning the tourism development in partnership with the community, this partner may or may not own part of the tourism enterprise.

This description introduces some additional aspects. One of the positive effects of community tourism is mentioned – that is, not only does the community receive a benefit from the tourism, but it also gains an awareness of the social and commercial value of its natural and cultural heritage and is therefore encouraged to conserve it.

This also involves the quality of the services offered and the organisational aspects – adequate standards to host guests from the so-called West (that is, from wealthy countries), even if at a simple rural level of accommodation but with access to a telephone and email.

The possibility to cooperate commercially with business partners, also external to the community, is mentioned. However, they must be in agreement with the aim to support the development of the community and plan the tourism in partnership with that community. Thus, excluding any type of business relations that would steal from or speculate on the community.

The literature contains an infinite number of definitions and descriptions and their systematic and detailed examination could lead us to going well beyond the objectives of this manual.

We will conclude here with a description provided by Community Empowerment Network (www.endruralpoverty.org)

Many of the world’s most beautiful resources exist in endangered habitats and vulnerable communities. Community-based ecotourism is a form of ecotourism that emphasizes the development of local communities and allows for local residents to have substantial control over, and involvement in, its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remain within the community. Community-based ecotourism should foster sustainable use and collective responsibility, but it also embraces individual initiatives within the community. [1][2]

With this form of ecotourism, local residents share the environment and their way of life with visitors, while increasing local income and building local economies. By sharing activities such as festivals, homestays, and the production of artisan goods, community-based tourism allows communities to participate in the modern global economy while cultivating a sustainable source of income and maintaining their way of life. A successful model of community-based tourism works with existing community initiatives, utilizes community leaders, and seeks to employ local residents so that income generated from tourism stays in the community and maximizes local economic benefits.
Although ecotourism often promises community members improved livelihoods and a source of employment, irresponsible tourism practices can exhaust natural resources and exploit local communities. It is essential that approaches to community-based ecotourism projects be a part of a larger community development strategy and carefully planned with community members to ensure that desired outcomes are consistent with the community’s culture and heritage. In many ways, participants are not employees, but managers. Community-based tourism initiatives decrease poverty not only by increasing income but also by providing residents of rural communities with the tools and knowledge necessary for long-term critical thinking and decision-making. Tourism is no panacea; community-based ecotourism and responsible tourism should be part of wider sustainable development strategies.

**CEN’s principles for community-based tourism**

**Identity:** Respect and preserve all the characteristics of the environment, help residents reclaim historical practices, revitalize productive activities, highlight the ethnic background of the population, and highlight the unique aspects of the locality, such as topography, climate, architecture, cuisine and handicrafts.

**Roots and Customs:** Highlight local cultural practices so that communities share their cultures and traditions with tourists with authenticity. Invaluable educational opportunities such as homestays and town-hall-style round of talks are encouraged so that tourists and local community members can mutually share cultural aspects such as food, music, folklore, and goods. Both visitor and community cultures will always be treated with appreciation and respect.

**Ecological Consciousness and Harmony:** Seek to conserve natural ecosystems and cultures by being a part of a larger development plan. All plans have a low impact on the local environment while highlighting the unique aspects of the locality, such as topography, climate, and architecture. The conservation of nature and rigorous concern with the environment influence the development of infrastructure for community-based ecotourism activities (i.e. building houses, roads, showers, etc.).

**Local Control:** Local control of the community-based ecotourism industry. Local leadership leads plans and encourages clear and transparent decision-making. Community members actively make decisions on strategies and acceptable levels of tourism based upon the community’s culture, heritage and vision. Strategies also equip local communities with the tools and knowledge necessary for decision-making, and to build effective structures to enable the community to influence, manage and benefit from ecotourism development and practice.
**Sustainable Economic Development:** Stimulate the local economy by generating income through the sustainable use of natural resources. All plans seek to ensure that the local population has an equitable share in benefits.

The description of community tourism, considered as a form of ecotourism, is in this case wide and detailed. Some specifically significant aspects are highlighted – community tourism as an element and outcome of a general development plan for an area. Its impact must not only be economic but also structural and infrastructural (construction of buildings, roads, setting up services) and always in the framework of local control in making decisions, respect for the local culture, environmental sustainability and sharing in the benefits generated by the tourism. The possibility is also underlined for visitors or guests to join the local people in different community events - the cultural life, traditions, food, music – all in a context of reciprocal respect.

We could continue our review, but we'll stop here as the concept has been sufficiently outlined and the descriptions quite thorough.

**THE SPREAD OF COMMUNITY TOURISM**

Community tourism has been accepted and consolidated, spreading in countries in the Southern Hemisphere, that is, in Latin America, Africa, Asia and, as well, in less economically developed areas - areas still untouched by tourism, in mountain and densely forested areas. This generally involves places where small communities are found, with serious problems for economic development, and sometimes hit by different phenomena or emigration risks. These are normally places not holding any exceptional tourist appeal and so have not been previously developed as a tourist destination. The communities, often with NGOs, under cooperation projects, are able to offer visitors areas of natural interest, even if still little known; local cultures with their own specific identities, and which, however, are at risk of being disrupted or trivialized; agricultural production, livestock farming or hunting and fishing, and local cuisines; authentic handicrafts; traditions, beliefs and lifestyles originating from established value systems and local history; and sometimes historical sites and artistic beauty of remarkable worth and interest.
However, we should not believe that all experiences in community tourism are crowned with success. Unfortunately, in literature and in conferences numerous cases are described regarding failure caused by different reasons – the inadequate previous evaluation of the actual potential and objective conditions; local rivalries and jealousy; errors made by the NGOs, sometimes focused more on the formal achievement of the project rather than on the effective results to be attained; and the absence or weakness of a marketing and communications strategy. The outcome is that the tourists don't arrive, or if they arrive, they leave dissatisfied. The community suffers the frustration of being unsuccessful and the experience is abandoned, or other projects are requested, thus resulting in a practice or mentality of dependence on donors or NGOs, an “easy charity” situation.

However, there are also many successful experiences, developed in different countries, from the Caribbean to South America, from both French-speaking and English-speaking African countries, and from the developing Asian countries.

In recent years, in some countries, there have been moves to regulate the phenomenon aimed at supporting and spreading this form of tourism.

In Costa Rica, the Ley de Fomento del Turismo Rural Comunitario (CANTURURAL) was put into effect. Its art. 2 establishes the objectives and contains all the basic principles for community tourism – environmental safeguarding, respect for the local community and its traditions, the economic sustainability in creating social services for the community, poverty reduction, and the satisfaction of the guests who increase their knowledge and awareness of the problems concerning sustainability. As well, the objective of inter-cultural tolerance has been added, which is a vital issue in Latin American communities, especially in more remote areas where indigenous peoples live, or populations of European origin and, in some countries, populations of African origin.

**ARTÍCULO 2.-Objetivos de esta Ley**

Son objetivos de esta Ley los siguientes:

a) Dar un uso óptimo a los recursos ambientales que son un elemento fundamental del desarrollo turístico, manteniendo los procesos ecológicos esenciales y ayudando a conservar los recursos naturales y la diversidad biológica.
b) Respetar la autenticidad sociocultural de las comunidades anfitrionas, conservar sus activos culturales arquitectónicos y vivos, y sus valores tradicionales, así como contribuir al entendimiento y la tolerancia intercultural.

c) Asegurar actividades económicas viables a largo plazo que reporten beneficios socioeconómicos bien distribuidos, entre los que se cuenten oportunidades de empleo estable y de obtención de ingresos, así como servicios sociales para las comunidades anfitrionas, que contribuyan a reducir la pobreza.

d) Promover que el turismo rural comunitario tenga un alto grado de satisfacción entre los turistas y que este represente para ellos una experiencia significativa, los haga más conscientes de los problemas de la sostenibilidad y fomente prácticas turísticas sostenibles.

In Ecuador, since 2002, there has been a law recognising and supporting the association of community tourism called Federacion Plurinacional de Turismo Comunitario del Ecuador, that involves a hundred or so experiences in the country.

In Bolivia, there exists the Ley de turismo which provides for “community-based tourism”.

On its website, the “Red de turismo comunitario de America Latina”, RedTours, lists 317 community tourism projects found in 14 different countries.

Community tourism is now present in many countries. A brief search brings up experiences in Thailand and Zimbabwe, in Senegal and Cambodia, in Gabon and Kirghizistan, in Zambia and in all the South American countries.

Substantially, the principles are always the same. The only important news, as we have seen, is the fact that many countries have legislated on the subject, recognising and supporting community tourism, seeing it as the best way to fight poverty, to contribute to economic development, to create employment and to increase respect for the natural resources and local cultures. Many international agencies, with the UN as their reference, such as the World Organization for Tourism, also specifically support community tourism, particularly through the ST-EP projects - Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty.
THE CONDITIONS FOR CREATING COMMUNITY TOURISM

We are dealing with a complex subject, that carries implications of a diverse nature – social, cultural, economic, legislative and, therefore, no single and fixed solutions exist. There are many different paths that can be taken, with many different variables and alternatives. However, here we can outline a few necessary conditions.

First and foremost, the existence of a community, that is, a nucleus of people who live in the same place and face, more or less, the same problems and share an idea, a project, the same objectives.

The local community is, however, that made up of the stable inhabitants. Those who through the community tourism project identify the objectives of common interest – making their village attractive, enhancing their history, monuments, natural beauty, culture, products; organising together the reception and accommodation; establishing cordial and friendly relations with the guests; gaining from the tourist activities economic benefits and employment in as equitable form as possible, resulting in a fair distribution in the community.

The equitable distribution of economic benefits appears to be very important in creating and maintaining consensus in the project and in avoiding and preventing any possible rivalry, jealousy and misunderstanding that can occur when there are only a few who gain from the situation and many who are left with little or nothing. It is also quite clear that there can be those who do not wish to gain any economic advantage from the project but are satisfied with the fact of merely participating in it, working in a voluntary capacity. For example, this could involve the very elderly who are willing to recount old stories about the village to guests, to show photos and collections, to accompany the tourists through the streets or into the countryside, describing the life of the past, the habits and customs......similar to what 'greeters' do in cities, accompanying their guests gratis for some hours, showing them the town's daily life and curious things that escape the tourist guides. There are also those who prefer not to be paid, also to avoid taxation complications, and others who would not know how to go about being paid or who are happy with only a tip. However, all those who carry out a service activity in the project must be by law regularly and fairly remunerated.

THE ENHANCEMENT OF IDENTITY
It is important to carry out within the community a thorough scouting in order to identify who is in a condition to offer something of interest. This must begin from the assumption that what could be interesting for the tourist or visitor may appear to be trivial to the resident – for example, an old traditional work, unknown to the visitor. Therefore, the artisan workshops should be a priority, and if possible also offer the guest the opportunity to try to make an object or contribute in making it. They will then be much more willing to make a purchase, as the object/souvenir becomes part of the so-called 'booty' of the trip, that is, all those objects (and also memories) that are in some way linked to traveling and that can be taken back home and shown to friends (photographs, videos, souvenirs, typical local hand-made products).

Traditional agricultural production also is of great interest – plantations, kitchen gardens, orchards, livestock farming of all kinds, and all the structures for processing the agricultural products. The visit must be enriched by the appropriate explanations, demonstrations, tastings and sometimes by the opportunity to participate themselves in the work, obviously as an experience, and finally purchasing the products. Everyone likes to make something, and objects produced personally have a much higher value than those merely bought. Therefore, it is really important, when possible, to involve the visitor in a step in the working and production of the product.

Traditional cultures can of course be another attraction. Festivals, religious celebrations, rites, markets, music festivals, and dances must be made known and revived if over the years they have been abandoned or lost and perhaps even forgotten. It is important to maintain the authenticity with events not being modified, shortened and changed to different dates so as to accommodate the visitors. It should be remembered that the visitors must adapt themselves to the life of the locality which they are visiting and not the residents to them. Each event must be suitably explained so that only what is well understood can be appreciated.

Community tourism usually appeals to people with a refined palate, with a higher educational and cultural level, and who immediately realize when something is false or artificial.

Therefore, the local culture should not be trivialized to a purely folkloric level, and any actions leaning towards a “staged authenticity” should be rejected. This does not exclude that in enhancing and representing an historical and cultural event it could be possible to adopt a path of rediscovery, reacquisition, and reinterpretation. This could involve making use of changing elements, keeping in mind that culture itself is subject to change and that at the risk of trivialization, folklorisation and distortion, there is also the risk of creating a museum piece, a fixed presentation, lacking in life and soul (and so, of little interest and appeal).
THE APPEAL
Regarding this, we should remember that we are speaking of tourism. Of communities, but tourism. Tourism grows on culture, just as it grows on nature, entertainment, sport, games, etc., but it does not however coincide with culture. It has different objectives. Tourism must above all involve appeal. In every tourist destination there must exist elements of appeal, and which must be taken into account also by those who plan to set up forms of community tourism if they don't want to be disappointed. The life of the visitor with the community and in the community must have appealing elements that can offer emotion, stimulation, sensations and surprises.

Exploring the elements of appeal must encompass the historical facts or the stories that have occurred in the place, which can arouse the visitors' interest and curiosity. However, this must be based on being aware that an historical fact in itself is not especially interesting if it has not left any visible signs in the locality, as a physically identifiable place, or also the oral testimony of someone who had been a player or witness to the event. Illegal past activities can also be an element of appeal, owing to the fascination that transgression and adventure holds for all of us. We have seen rediscovered in certain places in Latin America illegal or criminal activities of the past such as pirating, poaching and smuggling. It is however important that these are activities which occurred in the far distant past, otherwise there is the risk of being accused of excusing these crimes....... Meetings with the more interesting members of the community are highly appreciated – the local leaders, the religious authorities, artists, and all those who have something interesting or curious to tell. The meetings may also not be specifically planned in the visit program, depending on the availability of these people, which may not always be guaranteed, but these meetings surely constitute a positive and pleasing surprise. Just as disappointment and irritation can also arise when cancellations in the program occur, even if not due to the responsibility of the organisers, in the same way the unexpected can result in a pleasant surprise and satisfaction. This involves opportunities (visits, meetings, participation in the local life, personal inter-relations) which mainly depend on the choices that the community makes concerning the degree of involvement they intend to take in their relations with the visitors, the guests.
TOURISM FOR, WITH, IN THE COMMUNITY

Community tourism can be proposed on different levels of intensity and degree regarding the relations between the local community and its guests. In fact, there can be a first level, where the expectation of the locals is that the tourism operates and is organised for the community. At this level the expectations are more of an economic nature. The tourism must generate economic returns which benefit the community; it must foster the setting up of business activities, offering work opportunities; it must contribute to stemming the decline of the community and emigration; it must be the opportunity to obtain funding to recover and restore its historical and artistic heritage, to improve the cultural life, the public services and the management of the area.

A higher level is reached when visitors participate in the activities of the local community. Here we are speaking about tourism with the community. The visitors become a part of the more important events of the cultural life of the locality together with the inhabitants; participate in the religious festivals; visit the farms and artisan workshops; participate in the fishing catch together with the fishermen. In a word, they participate, but as outsiders, in the life of the local community.

However, the highest level can be defined as tourism in the community. The visitor, perceived as a temporary inhabitant in the locality they have found themselves, fully participates in every moment of community life, usually lives in the home of a local family, is invited to a wedding or a funeral, enrolls in the local cultural association and becomes involved in its activities, and shares with the locals the day to day life of the community.

Every community fully and autonomously decides the level of interaction they wish to adopt with the visitors. The visitors must realize this and accept this condition, as it is the community which makes the final decisions and adopts the “rules of involvement” and not its guests.