Tourism in Aït Bouguemmez (Central High Atlas, Morocco): social representations of tourism and its impacts in the perception of the local community.

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

This study aims to contribute to improved knowledge of mountainous regions in countries of the Global South as tourist destinations, considering how little is known of the social representation tourism has in communities in these regions. The aim is also to contribute towards improved knowledge of the object of study, through the description of the main representations of tourism and its effect and the outlining of factors which cross over and interfere with these representations.

Objectives

This project has two main lines of thought as foundation: first, to understand the representations that tourism and its impact has among the mountain settlement of Aït Bouguemmez, and second, to identify the

critical ability of the local community regarding tourist activity. Starting with these premises, the following objectives were defined:

i) Main objective

To recognise the social representations of tourism and its impact in the mountain community of Aït Bouguemmez.

ii) Specific objectives

- To define a reference framework on the representations of tourism and its effects, as perceived by the mountain community of Aït Bouguemmez;
- To identify factors which interfere in the defining of these representations (ex. participation in tourist activity, training, etc.);
- To evaluate the existence of critical ability in the local community regarding tourist activity;

- To identify the connection between the social representations of tourist effects and the changes in the local architecture of the villages in the valley.

Methodology

Focus is placed on a qualitative approach, within the framework of the Theory of Social Representations (TRS). Following this perspective, of qualitative nature, we are not searching for general results, but rather for an understanding of social representations in the Aït Bouguemmez community, regarding tourism and its effects. We have opted for qualitative research, along with direct observation assuming that it would allow for a deeper understanding of experience and on how the community reflects and acknowledges tourism and its effects.

The study resorts to semi-structured and non-structured interviews performed on the local community and on direct observation of the villages, the habits and daily practices of the locals. Data were collected through 48 semi-structured interviews and 23 non-structured interviews of locals, with and without professional tourism activity; direct and structured observation of the architecture of buildings in 10 of the 25 villages in the valley; and also observation of the transformations in the daily life of the locals.

A specialized computer program – Nvivo10 – was used to analyse the research data, interpreting and studying the data through the content analysis based on the proposed theory. Besides, a statistical and bibliographical selection was gathered from secondary data sources.

This research adopt an articulation on various methods (interviews, observation and secondary data sources), based on the supposition that the analysis of the interviews, along with the observation of aspects which are inherent to the daily life of its subjects and to the mapping out of complementary information, will contribute to a better understanding and an identification of social representations.

Results

As results from the research performed, tourism appears as a necessary component of life in the valley and for most of the interviewees, its social representations are associated with work and economic return, rooted in the improvement of living standards. Regarding its impacts, the most evident representations are connected to economic issues and what is most strongly felt is that tourism contributes to job creation and an increase in family income. As results of socio-cultural impacts, local community perceptions are primarily centred on changes in dress and ways of thinking, and tourism does not seem to be perceived as a factor of sociocultural disruption. Regarding the environment impacts, results indicates perception that tourism has contributed to the development of environmental awareness in the local population. The research also demonstrates that socio-demographical factors do not seem to affect the representations that the respondents have about tourism and its impacts.

As findings of direct and structured observation of the buildings architecture, the alteration construction average was 18.6% that indicates a preserved build landscape. Moreover, in what concerns the constructed landscape, there does not seem to be a direct relation between the more tourism centred villages and alterations in local architecture, which appears to be, rather, associated with the central functioning of the villages.

Results indicate that Aït Bouguemmez seems to be a valley with an environmental and cultural sustained tourism activity and where the local community is very capable of do a critical management of this activity. From the research performed it is also possible to understand that the Aït Bouguemmez community values its culture and its traditions, acknowledging the importance of these elements for tourism, not devaluing, however, modernity, especially in what concerns the improvement of living standards of the local population.

Theoretical conclusions

The present study is important for this type of territory because alternative tourism, especially that which involves contact with nature and in countries which are considered as developing, does not always appear as a positive practice for the host communities. Besides, these territories are not common objects of study such as those in developed countries are, mainly when it comes to understanding the perception of the impact of tourism according to local communities in mountainous regions.

This project hereby presents how a mountainous community perceives tourism and its impact and the changes in the daily practices, which result as of this activity. According to the perceived, tourist activity presents itself as fundamentally a positive practice, contributing to an improvement in living standards, to cultural revitalization and to the environmental awareness in the community.

Practical application of the dissertation

This project contributes towards knowledge on mountainous regions in countries of the Global South, which are tourist destinations, more specifically on the social representations that tourism and its impact has on local communities in this type of region. In this sense, this project also contributes towards a better understanding of the local environment and the socio-economic changes which result from tourism, serving as a base for more appropriate political decisions and planning that affect the territories in view, keeping in mind that each destination has very specific characteristics and that tourism is made of different relations, within a system that includes nature, people and traditions.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of chapter one

The current project is divided into six chapters. The first provides a general view of the structure of the thesis, introducing the foundation of the research to be developed. The chapter begins with a discussion of the importance of tourism, its connections and effects on mountains regions, highlighting, in

this sense, its relevance. The objectives of this project and a summary of the applied methodology are also outlined. The chapter concludes with an outline of the structure of the project.

Abstract of chapter two

The second chapter is a theoretical discussion of the object of study. The aim is to further develop knowledge of the areas of study and to provide a framework for the present study, an interpretation of what are mountains and mountain tourism is discussed, as well as the impacts which result from tourist activity in these territories, using this debate to focus on the issue of mountain tourism in regions of the Global South. The Theory of Social Representations namely its history and relation with research on tourism is hereby discussed. In this chapter a link is established between the different themes contributing towards a better understanding of the research and methodologies at work. We also explore the theoretical justification, which defines this project and connects the theories of social representation with the impact of tourism in mountainous regions.

Abstract of chapter three

Chapter three focuses on the region which is being studied, depicting it according to geography, demographics, economic and touristic aspects, also within a national framework. As is common in this kind of chapter, it is based on secondary sources (monographs, scientific articles, other studies and statistics), complemented with diverse information, of both qualitative and quantitative nature collected on location during field work performed on the region. Finding the time and space for this presentation turned out to be fundamental in the understanding, not only of local conditions for the development of tourism, but also the importance in the choice of this location and some of the methodologies applied in the course of this project.

Abstract of chapter four

Chapter four provides an outline of the methodology by depicting in detailed manner the methodological framework used in this

investigation and describing how data was collected. The chapter begins with a structuring of the methodology and by identifying the factors which conditioned the investigation, discussing the advantages and challenges which characterise qualitative analysis. In this chapter the reasons for the territorial limits in the study as well as the form of each of the tools used in the investigation (interviews and direct observation) are also discussed, outlining how these were structured and performed and presenting in a detailed manner how the data was collected.

Abstract of chapter five

Chapter five includes data analysis, results and consequent discussion. Based on the interviews applied to the local community, complemented with direct observation, this chapter outlines how tourism and its impact is represented within the Aït Bouguemmez community, along with an interpretation of what causes these representations. For a better understanding and framing of the obtained results, a description of the most obvious transformations that have taken place in the landscape and on lifestyles in the Aït Bouguemmez valley is also provided. In this chapter, based on field work and the observations performed on the field, visible impacts are described and evaluated, placing

special emphasis on the transformation of the constructed landscape and on the daily life in the valley.

Abstract of chapter six

In the final chapter six conclusions and limitations are provided, based on the results obtained in this project. This chapter is also an encouragement for further research in this field, in other mountainous regions, for a better understanding of local communities and the identifying of common characteristics, while on the other hand the monitoring of perceptions in this type of community in what regards tourism and its impact along time. The chapter ends with a number of recommendations of a more practical nature to the local community and for the benefit of future touristic planning on the field.

Available: This thesis is available on University of Lisbon Repository at <http://hdl.handle.net/10451/15611>.