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Knowledge networks and partnerships for capacity development in tourism

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Goal and objectives of the dissertation

Goal

Tourism is considered as a tool for socio-economic development. Several communities have viewed it as an important sector for economic diversification (Razzaq, et. al, 2013). However, most developing countries confront several issues such as lack of wealth and resources which makes it difficult in eliminating poverty. The scarcity of resources from both national and local levels impedes a destination's growth and development. In this instance, more support and assistance from various sectors are needed for communities to develop. In places where resources are scarce and institutions are weak, capacity development (CD) expects to bring change and empower destination communities. CD is essential in finding practical solutions to territorial problems that can be best resolved through a collaborative approach thus, institutions and networks play a vital role in empowering people and communities. The main aim of the thesis is to investigate on how knowledge networks and partnerships (KNPs) strengthen capacity in destination communities to achieve inclusive, sustainable development.

Objectives

The thesis aims to achieve the following objectives:

- To determine the impacts of strengthening capacity in destination communities;
- To assess the socio-environmental issues and challenges that impact the effective implementation of CD programmes in destination communities;
- To examine the roles that KNPs play in creating innovation, building capacity and empowering individuals, organizations and institutions; and
- To explore 'best practices' and present empirical evidence of CD approaches in various destination communities for the formation of a more holistic, practical capacity development in tourism (CDT) framework.

Methodology

Mixed methods multilevel design was applied for this research where it incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data and analytical tools to generate meta-inferences about more than one aspect of a multilevel phenomenon (Headley & Plano Clark, 2020; Maxwell, 2004). Findings from each phase were merged into one overall interpretation. Data collection techniques include literature reviews, secondary data analysis, a case study and an online survey. The research adopted a 'pragmatic' approach, which is not committed to any single system of philosophy and reality (Creswell, 2014; Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

To determine the key issues or problems confronting CD, a systematic literature review was initiated in the first phase. Published articles from Scopus database were selected for qualitative content analysis. This phase was conducted from July to September 2018. 36 articles, published in English, ranging from year 2000 to 2018 were reviewed to determine the relevant issues and findings. Results were categorized into three domain groups: 'networks & governance,' 'community empowerment & development' and 'knowledge management.'

For the second phase, a case study was applied. Through participant observation, the case in Misfat Al Abriyeen, Al Hamra, Oman highlights a local community project that transformed idle resources into useful tourism assets. The project was approved with a five-year implementation plan (2016-2021) under the supervision of Ministry of Tourism (MoT), Oman.

The third phase employed a descriptive approach based on a previous systematic literature review (first phase) published in 2018. This phase proceeded with an in-depth review of 17 papers under the 'networks and governance' domain, which emphasized collaboration as the most suitable approach in managing problems or issues confronting CD in destinations. The qualitative content analysis was carried out between the period November 2020 to February 2021.

To establish the relationship of tourism to CD, panel data analysis was adopted in the fourth phase. Human development (HD) was used as a proxy variable. Panel data analysis is considered a powerful tool for analysing complex datasets that contain both individual-specific and time-specific characteristics (Wooldridge, 2010). The purpose is to basically investigate the impact of tourism to HD in ten countries which were selected from twenty-eight case studies covered in the third phase. These ten countries with different government structures have the complete Human Development Index (HDI) data for the period 1996 – 2019.

For the final phase, an online survey was conducted to understand the participants' perceptions towards CD from organizations or companies involved in CD programmes applied to tourism, destinations and/or sustainable development. Non-probability sampling (voluntary response sampling technique) was applied. A total of 206 responses were received for the whole duration of data collection between July 2020 - June 2021. After validation, 116 valid responses were analysed.

Results

In the first phase, findings reveal that CD in urban-peripheral destinations can be categorically grouped into three domain groups: 'networks & governance,' 'community empowerment & development' and 'knowledge management.' Most articles discussed were issues related to networks and governance.

For the second phase, the Misfat Al Abriyeen project has helped MoT-Oman to enhance their licensing and classification of heritage inns under new hotel categories. Local members were satisfied with the benefits they received. The project is a model where local community embraces tourism through CD, resulting to better awareness and understanding and better entrepreneurial commitment, education and management of idle properties.

Based on extended review (third phase), networking, partnerships, stakeholders, involvement, engagement and collaboration are the mostly discussed themes which are synonymous to collaborative approach. It reveals that capacity building through stakeholder collaboration enables meeting the objectives with the purpose of empowering diverse stakeholder groups.

With reference to panel data between tourism and HD (fourth phase), political stability is found statistically significant in all models and has a positive relationship to HD. Results suggest that political stability is fundamental to any country in determining economic growth, employment and specifically, HD (Cáceres, 2010).

For the last phase, based on ordinal logistic regression (OLR) model, public and private organizations have a significant effect on the delivery of CD programmes. However, education level, gender, age, function, number of staff in the organization and years of service do not have a significant effect on CD. Moreover, KNPs and relevant issues (RIS) are both positively associated with CD. This validates the claim that KNPs play an essential role in building capacity and empowering individuals, organizations and institutions.

Overall, results support the propositions and objectives. KNPs stimulate a 'bottom up' approach and build 'cohesion' and 'collaboration' among stakeholders. KNPs are a key element of an effective CD in destination communities. Relevant issues and considerations or factors which can be external or internal, such as: institutional procedures and practices, voluntary commitment, socio-political structure, political stability and culture also impact CD programmes. These elements are critical in the effective management of CD to achieve the desired outputs and outcomes, mainly, 'empowerment' and 'engagement.'

Theoretical conclusions

The thesis highlights that strengthening capacity in destination communities: helps alleviate poverty, supports the creation of jobs and productive employment, promotes decent growth and (human capital) development, reduces inequalities, and promotes knowledge management and innovation. With reference to socio-environmental issues and challenges that impact the effectiveness of CD implementation, institutional procedures and practices, socio-political structure, culture and voluntary commitment are all validated as key factors.

KNPs play a major role in creating innovation, building capacity and empowering individuals, organizations and institutions. KNPs for CD lead to community engagement and empowerment; and KNPs play a positive role in building capacity amongst individuals, institutions and communities for sustainable tourism. Best practices and empirical evidence about CD in destination communities were validated due to high level of agreement towards multi-sectoral partnerships, 'bottom- up' approach, and cohesion & collaboration amongst stakeholders. Finally, KNPs serve as a common attribute and integral element of an effective CD programme in destinations, of any structural type or form.

Practical application of the dissertation

Most studies about CDT have used qualitative methods (in the form of case studies) and there is a dearth of research about CDT using quantitative and mixed methods. This thesis presents a collective study, with data and information from multiple sources that integrates various concepts, theories and approaches of sustainable development, KNPs, CD and tourism. The application of regression (panel data and ordinal logistic) is also a novel approach to this study.

Another unique approach to this study was the alignment of objectives and propositions to key United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDGs 1, 8, 9, 10, 12, 16 & 17) and European Union's Agenda. CD plays an essential role in supporting both national and global plans to attain the UNSDGs, either through North-South, South-South or triangular cooperation. Promoting innovative and smart economic transformations; greener Europe through investment and circular economy; and integration of marginalized communities are goals which are aimed for a smarter and sustainable Europe. Accordingly, tourism plays a major role in the development of Europe as the world's leading tourist destination (European Commission, 2020). CD policies must be designed and implemented in tourism destinations to boost local economies and drive horizontal spillovers and multiplier effects (Costa, 2021).

As more destinations strive to become more competitive and sustainable, knowledge application, sharing and exchange are considered vital for success. KNPs enhance CD and learning through the exchange of ideas, knowledge and skills, and they are fundamental to achieving sustainable development through various CD initiatives and best practices. Furthermore, KNPs have an essential role in policy formulation and decision making through dialogues towards policies, standards and regulations with industry stakeholders, associations and policymakers.

Content of the dissertation

Abstract of Chapter 1

Chapter 1 presents the introduction, relevance and rationale, describes the research problem, aims and objectives. The chapter also provides an overview of the thesis' structural outline.

Abstract of Chapter 2

Chapter 2 introduces to a general review of sustainable development and destination communities. It discusses key development concepts with different perspectives as viewed by several scholars. Accordingly, the role of stakeholders and local community are emphasized since collaboration have proven its effectiveness in destination management.

Abstract of Chapter 3

A review of different CD definitions, concepts and approaches are presented in this chapter. Moreover, the 'theory of networks and social learning (Eade, 1997) and the 'systems theory of capacity strengthening (Babu & Sengupta, 2005), are also briefly discussed.

Abstract of Chapter 4

Chapter 4 outlines the different concepts of KNPs and its relevance to CD. It also presents a brief discussion about tourism knowledge system, knowledge creation cycle and knowledge transfer. Relevant studies about KNPs, tourism and innovation, and innovation networks and the interconnections with each other, supported mostly with cases related to CD and destinations are reviewed.

Abstract of Chapter 5

Chapter 5 discusses the research methods, process, framework and design to address the main aim of the study. The research paradigm, epistemological, ontological and axiological philosophies in social sciences are presented, including the research approach and framework with aims, objectives and propositions. The research process/strategy, phases and data analysis techniques and tools are also discussed.

Abstract of Chapter 6

Chapter 6 presents the results from the systematic literature review conducted from 2017 to 2018 with the purpose of determining key issues or problems confronting urban-peripheral destinations, examining its relationship in transforming institutions and communities as well as establishing facts based on theoretical perspectives and approaches.

Abstract of Chapter 7

Chapter 7 presents a case study of a local community project in Al Hamra, Oman which was conceptualized to strengthen the residents' knowledge and management of idle heritage properties. It was formulated and implemented based on a 'government-community' partnership to have mutual social, economic and cultural benefits.

Abstract of Chapter 8

Chapter 8 emphasises the most suitable approach in managing problems that confront CD in destinations based on an extended literature review. The method exclusively reviewed a selected number of papers under the 'networks and governance' domain of previous systematic literature review.

Abstract of Chapter 9
Chapter 9 briefly explores the relationship between tourism and human development (HD). There are only a few studies about HD and tourism that focused on countries having a coverage of at least a twenty-year period. This chapter presents evidence on the relationship of tourism to HD in seven developing and three developed countries using three different panel estimation techniques, namely: random, fixed effect and Least-squares Dummy variables (LSDV).

Abstract of Chapter 10
Chapter 10 presents the overall results towards the perceptions of organizations or companies involved in CD programmes applied to tourism, destinations and/or sustainable development. Results were taken from 116 representatives of organizations from 20 countries and then analysed using descriptive statistical and ordinal logistic regression (OLR) analyses.

Abstract of Chapter 11
Results and the overall interpretation (merged or combined from various methods) to validate the propositions and the development of the framework are presented in this chapter.

Abstract of Chapter 12
Chapter 12 provides the key findings, conclusions and implications. It presents how the research objectives were achieved using mixed methods approach. It also addresses the limitations and provides appropriate recommendations reflected on the agenda for current and future research. Furthermore, it reflects on the relevance and contributions of the study in various aspects.

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