

Community Participation In Rural Tourism Decision Making : A Case of Karaikudi, Sivaganga District, Tamil Nadu

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism is an important mechanism for economic development and the creation of employment opportunities in many countries. This has attracted attention of the governments of developing countries looking to maximize economic benefits from tourism development in their own countries. Many developing countries have tried to exploit the tourism industry for economic stimulation by getting foreign investment, capital, and surplus from currency exchange. Local community participation in the decision-making process is always limited or sometimes marginalized, particularly in developing countries (Edelmann 1975; Lea 1988; Timothy 2000). Local communities not only fail to participate in the decision making process, but also fall short in maximising the benefits of tourism development (France 1998; Scheyvens 2003). Researchers (Keogh 1990; Hall 1998; Timothy & Tosun 2003) stress the importance of public participation in the decision-making process during tourism planning and development. Rural Tourism planning involves many stakeholders, such as government agencies, private companies, and non-government organizations (NGOs), which should strengthen the importance of public contribution in the public participation process. In fact, public participation in tourism development does not only relate to the decision-making process and the benefits of rural tourism development, but is also regarded integral to sustainable tourism (D'Amore 1992; Green 1995; Leslie 1993; Murphy 1988).

RURAL TOURISM IN INDIA

Rural tourism is becoming a dominant factor in the rural economy as tourism activity in rural areas has remarkably increased in all developed countries (Fleischer & Pizam 1997). The increased number of rural communities in Western countries that capitalizes tourism as a means of sustainable economic growth and development has successfully enhanced their economic condition (Blaine, Mohammad & Var (1993: 770), especially since the decline in the ability of farm agriculture to generate sufficient income for rural communities (Ying & Zhou 1997). Thus, rural tourism development programs have become evident in many countries as tourism has been considered an effective catalyst for rural socio-economic development and regeneration.

Rural tourism is a subset of tourism that would consist of wide range of things such as farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism. Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as **rural tourism**. Rural tourism is essentially an activity that takes place in the countryside. Rural tourism creates experiences for tourists who enjoy locations that are sparsely populated, it is predominantly in natural environment, and it meshes with seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions. Rural tourism has become quite admired since the last few years. **Ministry of Tourism**, Government of India and the **United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)** have partnered the innovative Endogenous Tourism Project during the 10th Five Year Plan, focusing on the rural tourism experience based on rural art and craft skills, cultural and natural heritage. The project is being implemented at **31 rural locations in 20 states** with community participation through NGOs or Panchayat Partners, District Collectors as Focal Points and specialized stakeholders.

THE CASE OF KARAIKUDI, SIVAGANGA DISTRICT, TAMILNADU

This research focuses on the **Karaikudi, Sivaganga District, Tamil Nadu** as a case study. **Karaikudi** has

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experienced tremendous development in public infrastructure and tourism facilities when the place was declared as a Rural Tourism spot by Ministry of Tourism, Government of India. Many construction projects in Karaikudi have only one purpose: to accommodate rural tourism development. To guide the progress of rural tourism development in Karaikudi, the government prepared the Structure Plan, which outlined the government policies and strategies for socio-economic and physical planning and development for rural tourism.

During the preparation of the Karaikudi Structure Plan, local residents have been provided with an opportunity to give their comments and suggestions. Nevertheless, based on his study, Din (1993) questioned the effectiveness of the public participation process during decision making, since local residents can only participate without influencing the decision making-process. Mohd. Saad (1998) stated that government administrators have made most of the decisions without public consultation. Due to that, most of issues related to tourism planning and development failed to address the needs of local residents (Din 1993, 1997) Therefore, Din (1993) suggested that local residents should be given greater chances to voice their opinions or ideas, despite of shortcomings in implementation approach and the lack of their understanding. Local residents need to be informed of tourism development since the lack of knowledge of tourism might result in the low level of awareness in the participation process and could contribute to negative perceptions. One of the main strategies to improve the living standard of the rural population, in the context of rural tourism development, is the promotion of community enterprise. It is a collective activity initiated by the community themselves to raise socio-economic standards, improve their environment and subsequently uplift their quality of life. Based on the concept of self-help, mutual help and common ownership, the community enterprise encourages the participation of the local community in conceptualizing their development needs and in the decision making over the control of scarce economic resources.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Johnson and Onwuegbuzie (2004: 17) defined mixed methods research as the class of research where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts, into a single study. Creswell et al. (2003) stressed that the mixed method researcher can give equal priority to both quantitative and qualitative methods or choose to emphasize either one or the other, but a researcher should select the designs that effectively answer their research questions. Therefore, from six designs suggested by Creswell et al. (2003), the concurrent triangulation design was selected and employed in this study. Figure 1 defines the steps involved in concurrent triangulation design in this study. The quantitative and qualitative methods are used as separate but complementary means to cover the weakness of one method with the strength of another method. The result from both analyses were compared and integrated in the interpretation process.

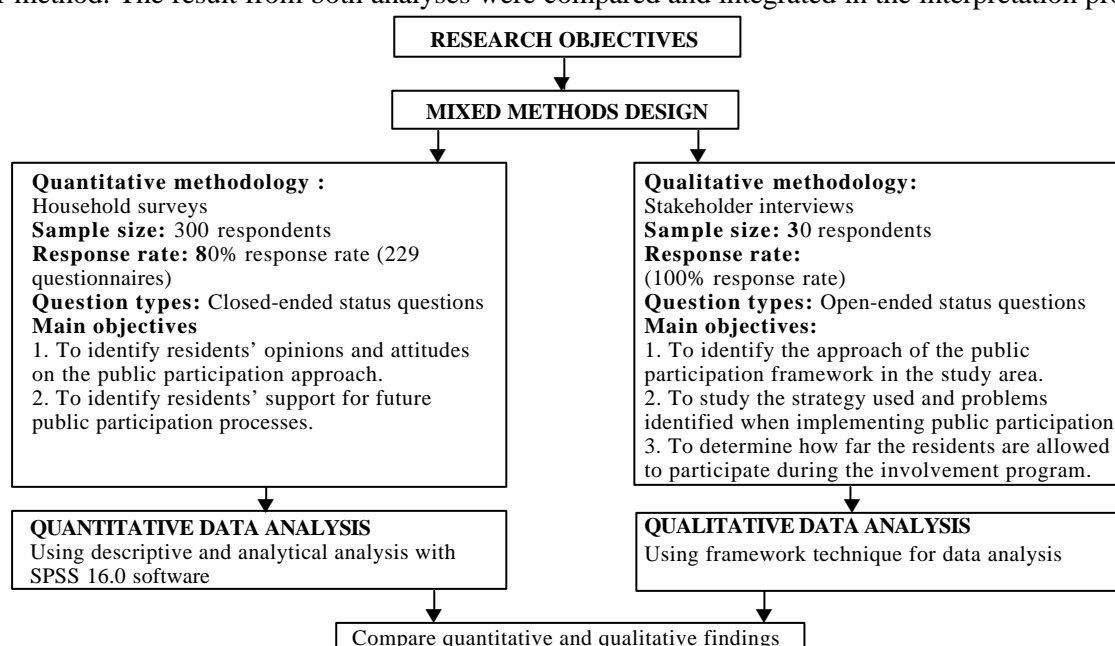


Figure 1 : Research Process

RESEARCH FINDINGS

RESPONDENTS' RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEMS IN THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROCESSES

An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) using principal component analysis was carried out to identify the respondents' perceptions of the problems of the public participation process. The *Factor 4 has only one item and was excluded for further analysis. Bartlett's Test of Sphericity shows statistical significance with the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin value of 0.7, exceeding the recommended value of 0.6 (Hair et al. 1995). This means that the items can be subjected to further exploration to identify the underlying factors that may exist. Reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha) was calculated to test the reliability and internal consistency of each factor and a cut-off point of 0.45 was used to include items in interpretation of a factor (Table 1).

Table 1: Factor Analysis On The Public Participation Process (N=229)

Factor of participation problems	Factor Loading				Commonality
	1	2	3	4	
Factor 1: Implementation weakness					
The involvement was limited to early stages	.816				.678
Was excluded from participation process	.787				.707
Only selected individuals were invited	.713				.573
The process was difficult and too complex	.629				.703
Factor 2: Inadequate information					
Did not know how to participate		.807			.671
Did not have enough information		.804			.673
Was not aware of the participation program		.730			.572
Factor 3: Attitude of Residents					
Were not ready to participate			.865		.782
No interest in participating			.827		.703
The process was not important			.589		.515
Factor 4*					
Was not invited to participate				.848	.824
Eigenvalues	2.93	1.87	1.58	1.00	
Variance (%)	26.69	17.03	14.40	9.15	
Cumulative variance (%)	26.69	43.73	58.13	67.28	
Cronbach's alpha	.67	.75	.68	-	
Factor Item	4	4	3	1	

From the Varimax-rotated factor matrix, four factors representing 67.28 % of the explained variance were extracted from 11 variables. However, factor number four was excluded from further analysis because it consists of one item, leaving another three factors with at least three or more items. The results showed the alpha coefficient for all three factors ranged from 0.67 to 0.75. The value is acceptable as it is above the minimum value of 0.50 indicated for reliability for basic research (Nunnally 1967).

VIEWS OF STAKEHOLDERS ON THE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IMPLEMENTATION

Stakeholder interviews identified three problems in the community participation processes in Karaikudi. The first relates to government control in the decision-making processes. Excessive control by the government limited the public involvement in the decision making process.

One of the government officers (Respondent 6) explained: *...if the public disagrees with the plan, they can make an enquiry to the State Planning Committee. That was the highest level of participation in any physical plan development in this country...even though the state planning committee might consider the enquiry; the committee is still free to make a decision which they believe is relevant.* Interestingly, the residents understood how the decisions were made.

One of the community leaders (Respondent 13) stated his regrets: Usually, the decision was made at the top level of the administration without in-depth involvement from the local level. Even when the government officials went to the local level, the approach used was not effective because we were not able to be actively involved. Second, the weaknesses of the existing participation approach was another major concern for most of the interviewees. They claimed that flaws in the current practice had limited residents' opportunity to be properly involved in the decision making process.

A community leader (Respondent 13) explained his views on that situation: *? the priority in the participation process was just to inform the residents but not to look at their reaction...actually, some of the residents*

had objections but the problem was that they didn't have proper means for voicing their objections. We were only involved in the early stages of participation.

The officer (Respondent 6) remarked how the limitation exists: ? *One of the failures was that the consultant carried out the household survey among the community and they claimed that was public participation but it was only a one-way communication approach. The residents just filled the questionnaire without having a discussion with the consultants to draft the plan together.* Finally, the attitude of the residents also contributed to the ineffectiveness and low response to the public participation process. The government officials blamed the residents' negative attitudes for not participating in the involvement process.

One of the government officers (Respondent 13) explained: ? *The residents did not participate because of their attitude...normally, people will not react unless something happens...they just wait to see what will happen to the development before giving their feedback.* However, the community leaders claimed that the residents were not involved because of insufficient information. They stressed that the government needs to inform and educate the residents prior to any participation process.

One of the community leaders (Respondent 24) explained: ? *The residents were not involved because they knew nothing...it is so often for us to find out about any project only after they had started their work...*

The NGO representative in a contrary statement blamed the government for not educating the residents, he stated that: ? *... We have urged the state and local government to educate local community about rural tourism development, the benefits of getting involved and the results of the development. We suggest them to organise more seminars or forums for local community.*

COMPARING THE RESIDENTS' AND STAKEHOLDERS' VIEWS

In a comparison of the findings, the quantitative and qualitative results show that the three main problems of the participation process are as follows:

- 1. Government control in the decision making process:** This issue was influenced by the administration system and bureaucracy constraints. The legislation limitation was also a major issue, since many of the important regulations and procedures were designed to maintain government control.
- 2. The weaknesses in implementation** resulted in the simplicity in the existing participation approach. The level of knowledge among the government officials also contributed to these problems.
- 3. Residents' attitudes:** Some of the residents had a negative attitude towards the government program and the participation process. However, the significant findings were that the limited information of the participation processes and the level of education caused those problems. Since the limitation of information decreased the number of participants, a low level of education resulted in the failure to increase the quality of comments or suggestions.

Despite the problem, majority of the respondents supported a greater involvement for future public participation processes. Survey results show that most of the respondents want to have more information (84%) and take part in the consultation process (83%). Although the current practice in Karaikudi does not include the participants in the decision-making process, the respondents want to be involved in the decision-making process (76%). They want to share the responsibility in making the decision (78%) and more than half of the respondents (54%) want to have complete control in the decision-making process. However, the stakeholders reacted differently to the survey respondents' reaction regarding the suggestion of greater public involvement. Most of them suggested that several aspects should be considered before the residents could be involved in higher levels of participation. One of the government officers (Respondent 2) remarked: ? *Firstly, we must educate the public about the meaning of the participation process and what they should do when they come to participate. However, I think at this moment, our citizens are not ready for a higher level of involvement yet but they maybe ready in the next 5 or 10 years. The highest level where they can make a contribution is at the consultation level.*

Community leaders (Respondent 21) supported this position: ? *I think our community is only ready to be involved till the second level (consultation) because we have to consider their level of education also, since many of them still cannot understand the purpose of the participation itself. What we need to do is*

to educate them and after that we can think about the next level, if not, we will struggle even at the first level.

However, another government officer (Respondent 4) explained that the problem not only existed among the residents but also within the government staff: *We, at the government level, are also at a stage where we are learning ourselves. We need to train and expose staff to the participation process, especially within the local government.*

CONCLUSION

Even though there were differences between survey respondents' views and the stakeholders' views on the stages of future involvement processes, several suggestions, such as increasing the education level of residents and government officials were important for further consideration. These factors significantly influenced the effectiveness of the existing public participation process in the study area. The range of stakeholders' opinions on improvements to the participation approach show how the system generally operated in the study area. The public seems to understand their rights and needs for greater participation in the decision-making process. However, by contrast, some government officials object to any suggestions to provide more opportunities for greater public involvement, even though they recognize its importance to improve the decision-making process. Some differences existed in the case of participation problems. The interviewees from the government groups explicitly represented the government and viewed the problem from their working experience. They thought the residents' attitudes played a major role in their response to the participation processes. Community leaders, however, disagreed and explained that the weaknesses in implementation and the limitations in the involvement process were the reasons for the weak response from the residents, and affected their ability to participate effectively. However, this study found that the residents were not excluded in any of the public participation process, in fact, they were encouraged to participate, but some limitations in the practice had unintentionally excluded them from the process.

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