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Tourism and Development in Southeast Asia

Claudia Dolezal & Alexander Trupp

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Over the last decades, Southeast Asia has experienced a rapid growth in international tourist arrivals from 21.2 million in 1990 to 96.7 million in 2014 (UNWTO, 2015a, p. 4). Tourism is no longer only regarded as a mere income generator, creator of jobs, or socio-cultural phenomenon, but also serves as a tool to foster beneficial and locally driven development in all its dimensions (Scheyvens, 2002). Recent years have shown a steady increase in tourism being used as a tool for development and poverty alleviation in the world's less developed countries (Darma Putra & Hitchcock, 2012; Holden, 2013; Novelli, 2015). Organizations such as the World Bank, UN agencies, NGOs, and governments put tourism high up on the agenda to achieve objectives of livelihood diversification, community empowerment, poverty alleviation, and development (Christie et al., 2013; Spenceley & Meyer, 2012; UNWTO, 2013). Understandings of development have significantly changed over the years, moving beyond ideas of economic growth towards the inclusion of social and environmental aspects. As part of the post-2015 agenda, development focuses on the eradication of poverty and hunger as well as on health, education, gender equality, sanitation, clean energy, and economic growth (UN, 2015). It further includes action against climate change, responsible consumption and production, the reduction of inequalities, and the conservation of the environment (UN, 2015). The UN includes tourism as a key activity to contribute to the achievement of its former Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the newly implemented Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), thus contributing to tourism being “firmly positioned in the post-2015 development agenda” (UNWTO, 2015b, p. 2).

With broader shifts in development paradigms from top-down and externaly-driven development to alternative, participatory, and ‘homegrown’ development (Potter et al., 2008), tourism in the developing world has equally experienced significant changes (Telfer & Sharpley, 2008). The alternative development paradigm prevalent in the 1980s, putting emphasis on local participation, people, and bottom-up development (Chambers, 1983), created the grounds for the emergence of alternative forms of tourism including ecotourism, sustainable tourism, pro-poor tourism, and community-based tourism (CBT) – all of which ultimately aim at generating more beneficial development for local populations (Reid, 2003).

The rise of small-scale participatory tourism initiatives – with the larger aim of increasing developmental benefits from tourism – was also fostered through negative socioeconomic and ecological impacts of mass tourism in Southeast Asia. These include the unequal distribution of economic benefits from tourism

or the overexploitation of natural resources for uncontrolled tourism resorts such as in Pattaya, Thailand, or Kuta in Bali, Indonesia. While Harrison (2015) recently stated that “alternative tourism will never replace mass tourism” (p. 53), one can at the same time observe a growing interest in sustainable forms of tourism in Southeast Asia. In countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia, for instance, CBT is used as an alternative tourism strategy to mass tourism, making room for local ownership and fostering sustainability and cross-cultural understanding (Boonratana, 2010; Dolezal, 2014; REST, 2013). In the Lao PDR, ecotourism and CBT have officially played an important role in national tourism planning as the local government announced its plan to become a “world renowned destination specializing in forms of sustainable tourism” (Lao National Tourism Administration, 2004, p. 6).

There appears to be an increasing awareness in Southeast Asian tourism that the once ‘toured’ need to experience greater levels of decision-making and power in order for tourism to work as an effective catalyst for development. As a consequence, tourism in Southeast Asia has experienced a stronger focus on development aspects, both within academia and in practice. Researching tourism in the developing world is no longer limited to understanding its impacts as well as local responses and mitigation strategies, but actually focuses on finding practical ways for how tourism can serve as an engine for development.

Nevertheless, tourism for development experiences regular criticism. One of these criticisms is that alternative or sustainable forms of tourism are often vaguely defined, referring “to anything which is not mass tourism” (Harrison, 2015, p. 64). In fact, alternative forms of tourism are often condemned for being too small-scale, for leading to tokenistic rather than real participation, and for increasing local inequalities (Goodwin, 2009; Tosun, 2005). In addition, tourism often increases pressure on natural resources in localities characterized by scarcity. For example, Cole (2012) illustrated this issue in regards to water equity and tourism in Bali, Indonesia. For ecotourism in Indonesia more generally, Erb (2001) has demonstrated that the environment is perceived as a resource to be exploited, even though the kind of tourism under study was aimed at sustainable development. In addition to environmental impacts that compromise sustainability in Southeast Asia (Parnwell, 2009), tourism leads to changing socio-cultural dynamics, including transformations in gender relations (Chan, 2009), cultural commodification (Cole, 2008; Trupp, 2011), and the use of heritage for economic and political ends (Hitchcock, King, & Parnwell, 2010).

Despite these negative consequences, residents’ agency in tourism and development is increasingly acknowledged, leading to a shift from simplistic binary divisions of power relations between tourists and residents, towards more nuanced analyses of tourism. Picard’s (1990, 1996) work on tourism in Bali, for instance, has demonstrated that instead of destroying Balinese culture, tourism became a part of it and created a “touristic culture” (Picard, 1990, p. 42), which, in turn, reinforced Balinese cultural identity. Dolezal’s research on CBT in Bali further reveals that residents empower themselves by playing with notions of authenticity to attract tourists and eventually be part of the global tourism market. Trupp (2015) shows how ethnic minority street vendors in Thailand’s urban tourist areas mobilize their social and cultural capital and become successful micro entrepreneurs. These examples lead us to think of tourism not as an external force impacting upon societies but as an internal dynamic, with residents constituting agents rather than taking passive roles in the tourism en-

counter. It is therefore key to acknowledge and understand residents' agency as well as local factors that constitute structural constraints in those places where tourism serves as an engine for development.

An increasing number of studies put local political contexts into the center of their analysis, investigating how tourism can and must be in line with wider national policies in order to ensure developmental success (Muangasame & McKercher, 2015). Policy makers and tourism developers in Southeast Asia (and elsewhere) view tourism as a way of increasing foreign investment and economic growth (Harrison, 2015). At the same time, Richter (2009) suggests that "governments can and must do more to make opportunities for their own people to travel and have recreation" (p. 145). Fostering domestic and cross-border tourism in Southeast Asia is one of the strategies to increase the local benefits from tourism, particularly when taking into consideration the increasing spending power of some Southeast Asian economies (King, 2015; Winter, 2009). Domestic tourism not only stimulates local economies through increased tax revenue but also avoids the use of long-haul flights, ultimately enabling tourism to follow principles of sustainability. Between 2003 and 2011, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) provided USD 58.7 million in the form of loans and grant assistance for the development of the tourism industry in the Greater Mekong Sub Region (ADB, 2012, p. 11). However, the positive impacts of such investments for local people also need to be questioned, as the ADB's program in the region features "a strong favour of neoliberalism", a focus on a mere increase of tourist numbers through cross-border travel, integration of national markets, and development of the private sector (Harrison, 2015, p. 62).

Despite the positive impacts of tourism on residents and their livelihoods, it remains questionable to what extent tourism can really contribute to development in all its dimensions. A study by Novelli and Hellwig (2011) on the perceived contribution of tourism to the MDGs shows that tourism largely neglects health issues, such as prevalent diseases (e.g. HIV and malaria), child mortality, and women's health. More effort therefore needs to come from those agents who specifically aim to tackle these aspects of development, as well as from the tourism industry itself, in order for tourism to cast wider health benefits. Partnerships with development agencies and NGOs not directly related to tourism are a way forward for tourism to yield wider developmental benefits (Saarinen, Rogerson, & Manwa, 2013). This proves crucial not only in practice but also in academia, where multi- and interdisciplinary studies are increasingly supported (Hitchcock et al., 2009).

By bringing together experts from a variety of backgrounds, this special issue contributes to the understanding of tourism's dynamics in Southeast Asia. It addresses a range of concerns connected to tourism as a tool for development by drawing on case studies from Thailand, Vietnam, and Indonesia.

V. Dao Truong and Michael Hall start the discussion on tourism and development by focusing on social marketing and its potential for poverty alleviation. By drawing on a case study of Sapa town in the northern highlands of Vietnam, their article discusses residents' perception of poverty and its causes to subsequently explore whether social marketing could be a potential solution. The authors argue for an increased use of social marketing as a tool that could potentially empower residents and bring their oftentimes marginalized voices to the attention of decision-makers.

Maribeth Erb contributes with an ethnographic study of tourism in Nusa Teng-

gara Timur province by investigating ‘Sail Komodo’ – a marine tourism event aimed at boosting tourist numbers and raising local standards of living in eastern Indonesia. The author reveals the contradictory nature of tourism as a tool for development, illustrated by examples such as the displacement of tourists at the event through government officials’ attendance and the lacking positive local impact that was initially promised. By analyzing tourism through the lens of a local event, Erb ultimately illustrates how tourism is conceptualized as “the reason to offer development programs, instead of seeing tourism itself as a pathway to development” (Erb, 2015, p. 159)

Claudia Dolezal shifts the discussion in another direction by offering an analysis of CBT in Northern Thailand, moving away from the oftentimes problematic nature of CBT and towards investigating the tourism encounter as a potential space for change. By drawing on MacCannell’s work on the tourism encounter and Said’s *Orientalism* in relation to tourism, her contribution questions the theoretical grounding that has long influenced investigations of social interactions in tourism. She argues that new forms of tourism such as CBT can make room for more beneficial resident-tourist relationships. As a consequence, some of the theories that have influenced our thinking of the tourism encounter need to be adapted or reconsidered in light of newer, more beneficial forms of tourism. CBT therefore is not only a tool for residents to empower themselves in inventing and managing their own tourism product in order to reap the economic benefits of tourism, but at the same time can lead to deeper and more meaningful relationships between residents and tourists.

Huong T. Bui and Timothy J. Lee’s case study of the Imperial Citadel of Thang Long in Hanoi, Vietnam, investigates the processes of turning heritage resources into tourism products. The authors pay particular attention to the relationship between heritage, identity, and tourism by investigating the process of commodification and politicization of UNESCO World Heritage in Vietnam. Rather than being demand-driven in its nature, Bui and Lee argue that the interpretation and presentation of heritage at the Citadel is governed by an ideological doctrine. Based on the generated insights, the authors ultimately offer recommendations for the management of heritage in Vietnam’s tourism industry.

In the section ‘Research Workshop’, Felix M. Bergmeister offers insights into his ongoing PhD project, investigating the construction and negotiation of “tourism imaginaries” (Salazar, 2012) in popular guidebooks and independent travel-blogs. In doing so, he analyses power relations as part of cultural representation in Southeast Asian tourism, thereby unraveling dominant Western discourses. At the same time, his research reveals insights into the possibilities that new media offers for representation, being more experience-based and forming ideas about Southeast Asian countries in new and very particular ways.

‘In Dialogue’ features an interview by Christina Vogler with Nancy Lindley, head of the *Chiang Mai Expats Club* and coordinator of *Lanna Care Net*, a network providing assistance for elderly foreigners settling down in Thailand. The interview offers insights into the expats community, the challenges that retirees from abroad are facing in Chiang Mai, and the system of care for elderly foreigners. The contribution thus blurs the boundaries between tourism and migration and discusses what happens when tourists become residents in the places they visit.

This special issue of the Austrian Journal for South-East Asian Studies therefore

constitutes a contribution to the wider debate on tourism and development by revealing new insights into the dynamics of tourism in Southeast Asia. Based on case studies conducted in Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam, this collection of papers highlights the importance of a local voice in development intervention to ensure developmental success. It elaborates some of the positive impacts that tourism can create in rural areas, while also uncovering a number of local paradoxes. At the same time, this issue revealed the need for further research that specifically focuses on best practice examples and draws on local expertise in order to maximize the benefits of tourism in the post-2015 era.



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