

HOST COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE ON SOCIAL SUSTAINABLE TOURISM – CASE STUDY OF GURA HUMORULUI – BÂRGĂU TRANSCARPATHIAN CORRIDOR

ANA. I. DINCĂ

*Department of Geography, Bucharest University, Nicolae Bălcescu Av., 1, 010041, Bucharest, Romania
e-mail: anktudy@yahoo.com*

The social dimension of sustainable tourism has been more recently introduced than ecologic and economic dimensions and it focuses on host community as its core element. It is however of great difficulty to quantify through universally accepted indicators the sustainable tourism aspects and its social elements in particular. The most noticeable attempts in this matter showed the survey as the most appropriate method to emphasize social aspects of sustainable tourism and the local and micro regional level as the suitable scale to study it. In the attempt to underline social aspects of sustainable tourism a survey was applied in a highly dynamic tourism area situated in the northern part of the Eastern Romanian Carpathians. The questionnaire focused on top indicators revealed by experts with extended experience on the field. The results showed that tourism domain is of real interest for local people improving general living conditions, providing jobs and local income and generally strengthening the economic environment.

Introduction

Social dimension was more recently integrated to the concepts of sustainable development and sustainable tourism than ecologic and economic dimensions of sustainability, emphasizing a growing interest for human community as the core of development. Doxey, 1976, Dogan, 1989, Butler, 1980 represent few of the names which approached sustainability from the social point of view, as many authors reconsidered the host community role regarding policy making, economic investment and management in tourism domain. Local community represents in this way a stakeholder that should benefit from the local income budget and should own tourism infrastructure in a fair proportion (Dumbrăveanu, 2007). Host community should play though an active role from sustainable tourism perspective deciding on the investment and policy level and at the same time suffering a certain impact of tourism development. Swarbrooke (1999, p.126) identified "a ladder of community influence" on tourism policy making starting from a basic level at

which the community is consulted but its views do not significantly influence public sector policy, continuing with stages at which communities are permitted to select a policy or a strategy from different options than to set the priorities for public sector policy and ending at the level of total control of tourism strategic policy. At the same time hosts would suffer an impact coming from tourism activities. The concept of sociocultural carrying capacity could be so defined as *the volume of visitors that can be accommodated before the host community society and/or culture begins to be irreversibly affected by the impact of the tourist* (Swarbrooke, 1999, p. 262). It is obvious that in a sustainable tourism perspective host community could not be separated anymore from tourism destination. UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) states, in the attempt to define this concept, that one of its main goals is to *respect the socio-cultural authenticity of host communities, conserve their built and living cultural heritage and traditional values, and*

contribute to inter-cultural understanding and tolerance. Moreover the economic objectives of sustainable tourism are also socially oriented as host community is perceived as an important tourism stakeholder that should benefit from *employment and income-earning opportunities* and participate as an informed decisional factor in tourism policy making. All these are to counterbalance the economic and ecologic goals aiming equilibrium among the three main dimensions of sustainable tourism.

How to measure social dimension of sustainable tourism?

One of the main problems raised by this very complex concept and by its social dimension in particular would be the extent to which it can be measured and evaluated. In this regard, a first reference point for designing sustainable tourism indicators would be the UNWTO list which appeared in 1995 and proposed a set of core indicators in the attempt to adapt the 21 Local Agenda to tourism. Social dimension was translated through indicators as: social impact (measured through the ratio of tourists to locals in peak period and over time) and local satisfaction (quantified through the questionnaire method trying to estimate level of satisfaction by locals). This list considered at first as a reference point by many theoretical studies proved to be far too general and insufficient for this very complex concept. A more practical approach based on real case studies was recently adopted by UNWTO itself (2004, 2005) and also by researches and scientists in the field. Consequently, in order to design general available indicators for sustainable tourism, studies using Delphi techniques and Panel interviews appeared, as these methods are

considered as the most appropriate to develop a rationale on complex and uncertain issues when exact knowledge is not available (after Miller, 2001). Two of the most quoted papers are those of Miller 2001 and of Choi and Siracaya 2006. They both focused on emphasizing the most relevant indicators for measuring sustainable tourism. The latter identified 125 indicators for 6 key domains of sustainable tourism among which social, cultural and political dimensions include indicators referring to host community. Within the social dimension the most important three indicators were considered host community satisfaction toward tourism development, host community attitude toward tourism development and litter/pollution. Other suggestive indicators referred to social cohesion (change in community structure), shift in social structure, community resources (degradation of natural and cultural resources), managerial employment from local residents, community health (overcrowding, congestion, crime rate, loss of traditional style) and the quality of life in general. Within the political dimension host community is reflected through its political participation (local resident participation in planning process, availability of resident advisory board, etc.). At this level it is also considered that tourism should be included as a major component of the planning policy at the community level.

Where to measure social dimension of sustainable tourism?

Both UNWTO and scientists generally agreed that tourism sustainability could be obtained at a microregional scale and that indicators should be of general reference but at the same time adapted to local conditions (as measurement units for

instance). In order to emphasize the social dimension of sustainable tourism the microregional territory of The Transcarpathian Corridor Gura Humorului – Câmpulung – Vatra Dornei – Bârgău,

situated in northern part of Romania (fig. 1), was chosen as a territory where a much more extended study on sustainable tourism was undertaken.

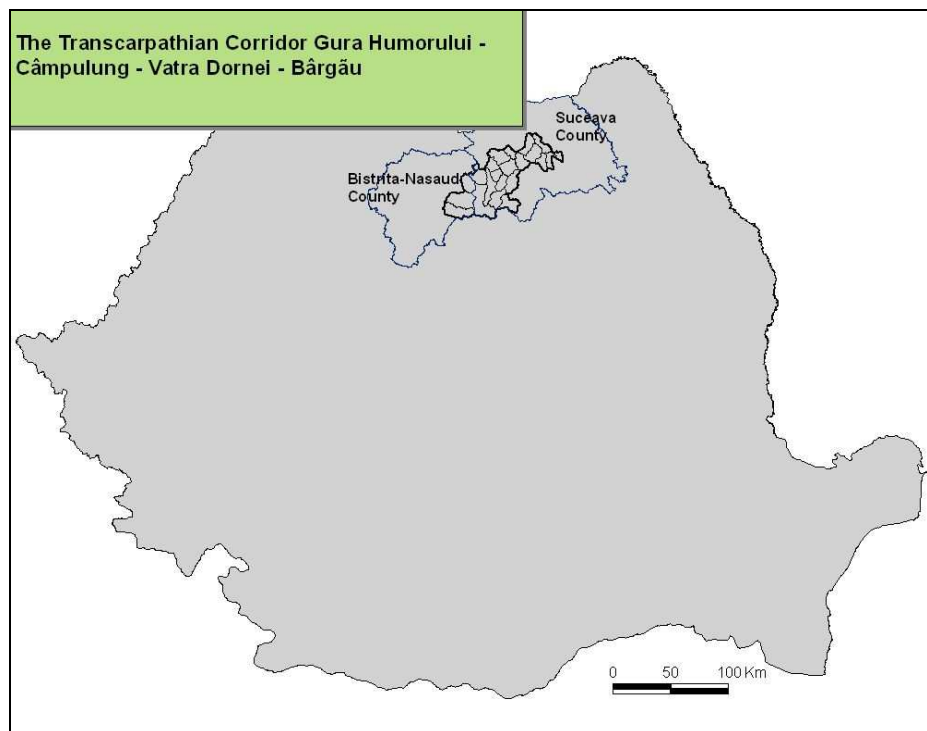


Fig. 1 The position of the transcarpathian Corridor Gura Humorului – Câmpulung – Vatra Dornei – Bârgău within the Romanian territory

The region represents an old communication and transport axis and an important socio-economic corridor between Northern Moldavia, Transilvania and Maramureș which suffered a significant economic restructuring process in the post-communist period facing the closing of many industrial units and the growth of the tertiary sector and especially of tourism sector. It includes three resorts of national interest (Gouvernement Decision 1,122/2002) concentrating an important volume of accommodation units and also most of tourist flows to Bucovina and between Bucovina and Maramureș (two powerful brands for national tourism). From the point of view of tourism space typology the area

might be considered morphologically as a continuous, *linear polinucleous mountaineous tourism space* and functionally as a *microregional tourism space developed both spontaneously* (due to the important tourism resources) and *through planned policy* (Muntele and Iașu, 2003). It combines both urban and rural space for which the traditional tourism function is to be more developed on the background of economic restructuring which generated an increased social vulnerability (unemployment and the need of professional reconversion). Tourism is once again considered as a main domain for mitigating exposure and adapting to a vulnerable socio-economic environment.

Methodology

The indicators already mentioned above proved to have a high level of applicability being measured mainly through qualitative methods (surveys). Consequently their scale might well be adapted on local conditions. This characteristic as well as the method used for selecting them made of Choi and Siracaya's study the departure point for our study in which we selected the top three ranking indicators characterizing the social dimension of sustainable tourism (host community satisfaction toward tourism development, host community attitude toward tourism development and the litter/pollution) as well as the political participation of the local community in tourism planning process as main indicators in order to characterize the social sustainability of tourism in the Romanian mountainous tourism microregion, of the Transcarpathian Corridor Gura Humorului – Câmpulung – Vatra Dornei – Bârgău, part of Eastern Romanian Carpathians. The specificity of the survey and also the need to adapt to highly limited time and finance resources made us consider a 95% confidence level. We also reconsidered the population size as we were interested to address questions to the young and middle aged groups of stable population (non-susceptible to migrate from the region in the future). We administered our survey to a population ranging between 30 and 59 years as the age groups between 20-29 years were very difficult to be found (oftenly having a temporary residence elsewhere – in a larger town or abroad - for studying or working purposes and being characterised by a high level of mobility) and as the groups over 60 years usually include retired people not meeting anymore the purposes of a sustainability study (not matching

with the ideas of investment and of active implication in local policy planning). Finally we could calculate a representative sample size of 381 persons. Before the survey was administered, it was pre-tested and appropriate revisions were undertaken. The local community survey was administered in 12 representative localities out of the 22 included in the Transcarpathian Corridor Gura Humorului – Câmpulung – Vatra Dornei – Bârgău during the winter of 2007. 600 questionnaires were distributed from which 540 returned showing a very good response rate of 90%. Due to the fact that persons responded freely and not in the front of an interview operator non representative persons (of other ages) couldn't be prevented from responding the questionnaire. So finally 407 usable surveys were selected as being representative from the respondent point of view.

Results

Sample structure. The sample distribution according to various criteria was considered. It showed a dominance of the feminine respondents (not influencing the results of the survey as its distribution was limited to 1 per household – assuring in this way a higher level of representativity as either a woman or a man could be equitably a representant of the household); a balanced proportion among the three selected age groups (a higher proportion was targeted for the younger age groups); the clear dominance of families with 3 and 4 persons (over 70% of the total sample) (fig. 2); a balanced proportion between those having an average and a high study level; between the blue and the white collars; a dominance of persons with an average income (500-1000 Ron – 31%, 1000 – 2000 Ron 35%) and with a constant

monthly revenue (> 70%); a very equilibrate proportion for dwellings according to no of rooms: 2-3 rooms, 4-5 rooms, over 5 rooms (about one third each), showing a disponibility of space (at

least for the category of over 5 rooms) which could be used for hosting VFR (visiting friends and relatives) and even tourists.

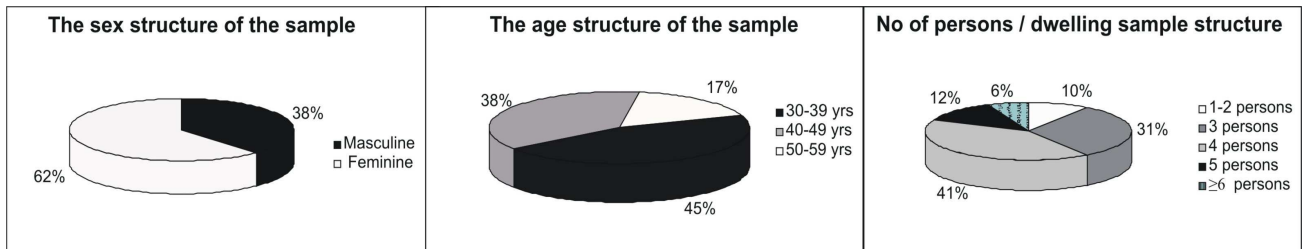


Fig. 2 The structure of the sample according to sex, age and no of persons/dwelling sample

General life quality is considered an important element for social sustainability as a high contrast between local households endowment and daily life conditions of the host community on the one hand and the level of comfort and services offered by accommodation units on the other could be an important factor which would influence the attitude of local people regarding tourists and the value which characterizes the host – tourist relation on Doxey's scale. The results on households level of endowment show high proportions for communication means (over 95% of households both in rural and in urban areas have a TV set and a mobile phone, over 70% of the urban respondents and only 30% of the rural ones had Internet connection at their home) and a lower level for urban infrastructure (a quarter of the respondents from the rural areas didn't have a bathroom in the interior of their house and more than a third were not connected to a central sewage system). It is thus explainable the fact that although the great majority of respondents (about 60%) declared satisfied with life quality both in their house and in their living place, about one third of them declared very

satisfied with the comfort of their house and a similar proportion declared dissatisfied with life conditions in their city/commune. The main negative points regarding life quality mentioned by respondents were the transport infrastructure (emphasized especially by those living in urban areas), the lack of working opportunities and of urban infrastructure: water supply and sewage systems, waste management (emphasized especially by those living in rural areas).

Participation to local planning remains a main social element within the political dimension of sustainable tourism as it emphasizes the extend to which the local population plays an active part in policy making (including tourism sector) and to which the local policy represents people needs and interests. In a first place it was emphasized that about 30% respectively over 40% of respondents considered to know moderately respectively to a little and a very little extent the projects and programmes developed by local mayoralty, their main source of information being the discussions with their friends, relatives and neighbours (over 65%), the local newspaper (for over 30% of the

urban respondents) and the public meetings (for approximately 20% of the rural respondents). The extent to which local projects represented people needs was very balanced (approximately 10% mentioned a very high, 20% a high, over 35% a moderate, 20% a low and 10% a very low extent). Even if not very well informed on local projects developing at the moment and generally moderately convinced that they represent their needs, over 60% of the respondents considered that they could influence in a low or a very low degree the decisions about the local development plans and projects. This could explain their moderate interest in local policy and development programmes perceived as being almost exclusively the mayoralty responsibility on the one hand and the fact that about one third of respondents considered that the present local development policy did not represent their interests.

Host community attitude toward tourism development; host community satisfaction toward tourism development; litter/pollution proved to be however favourable indicators for tourism

development. Despite the mostly inactive attitude of respondents toward local planning and development projects in general, when asked if they are interested in the local tourism activity only 6% of them declared that they are not interested, over 55% declared that they are interested to a certain extent and almost 40% stated that they are very interested in this local domain. This could be linked to the fact that over 50% of the respondents considered this domain to improve life quality at the local level and to bring an important financial profit. The main beneficiaries from local tourism activities were thought to be the managers of accommodation units (over 60% of answers) (fig. 3), all the other potential stakeholders (the local budget, the employees, etc.) being by far less significant (concentrated approximately 10% of responses each). Consequently over 50% of the questioned population declared that it would invest in local tourism (fig. 4) and that their main investments would be an accommodation unit of a boarding-house type.

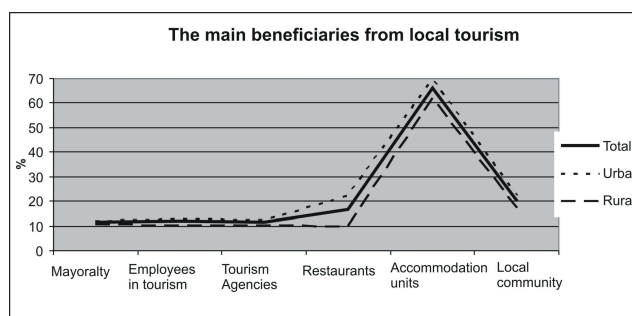


Fig. 3 The main beneficiaries from local tourism

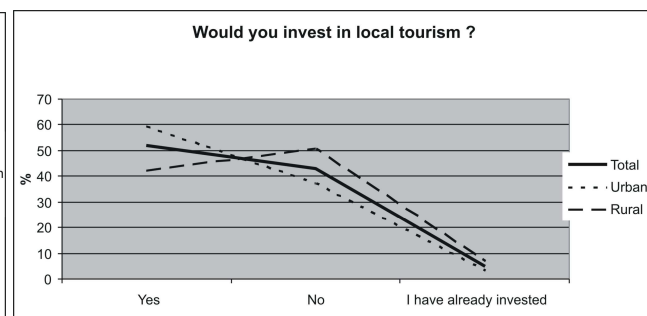


Fig. 4 The potential intention to invest in tourism activity

The attitude of host community could be seen thus as oriented on economical and financial goals as the respondents mentioned as main negative aspects of their life the lack of working

opportunities and the low incomes. They also regarded tourism as a domain which would develop transport and urban infrastructure, the life standard and their living conditions in general. Asked about

the way in which they perceived the natural environment (a main resource for tourism in the area) approximately 40%, respectively 15% of the respondents in urban respectively in rural areas considered it more degraded in comparison to 10 – 20 years ago. The question regarding the responsibility for litter and pollution in the local horizon area showed a proportion of over 75% of answers which considered that host community was responsible in a high and a very high extent for these problems whereas tourists were thought to have a much smaller impact. The insufficiently developed water supply and sewage networks as well as inappropriate local management systems are also contributing to pollution of local environment (mostly from host community part). From the social carrying capacity point of view, asked if they are disturbed in any way by tourism

activity in the peak season, 98% of the responses were negative. The cultural carrying capacity, the shift in social structure and the irreversible change of local traditions are difficult to be evaluated and also almost impossible to be linked to tourism activity as modern elements penetrate traditional rural areas through communication means (TV, Internet) and as many people are in full contact with a foreign environment (through working and/or travelling abroad; receiving guests and friends from abroad). Taking into consideration the economic part which tourism would play from the host community perspective and that, despite their subjectivity, local people admitted to be in a much higher proportion responsible for the quality of environment than tourists it was normal for most of the respondents to wish that tourists would grow in a high proportion in the future (Fig. 5).

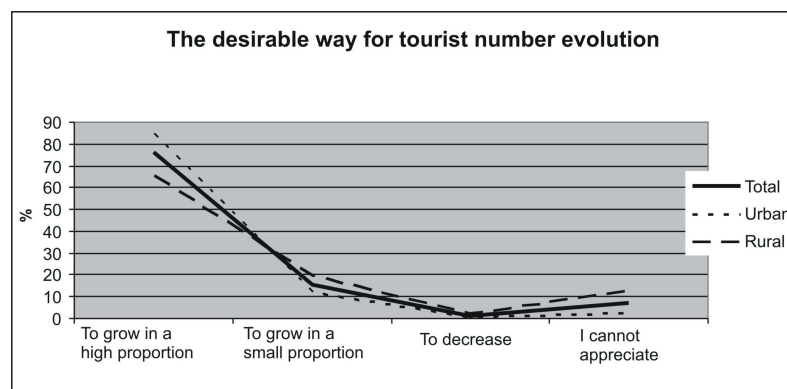


Fig. 5 The desired way of evolution for tourist number

Their attitude towards tourism development is thus a strongly positive one. Moreover people's will to invest in this activity shows high expectations regarding the economic benefits brought by this sector in the future.

Conclusions

The survey described above managed to reveal a real image about local community attitude and

satisfaction regarding tourism development in the area of Gura Humorului – Câmpulung – Vatra Dornei – Bârgău Transcarpathian Corridor and in this way about social aspects of sustainable tourism in the region. Tourism is generally perceived as a key domain which could provide jobs and income in a region with important tourism resources having a restructured economy weakened by decaying industrial units and focusing on emergent tertiary

activities. That is why most of respondents expressed their wish for the number of tourist to increase to a great extent. Unfortunately communities do not have an active relation with the

mayoralty and consequently they are not implied in the local policy making, admitting at the same time their low level of information and their reduced capacity of influencing decisions at this level.

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