

SOCIAL STRUCTURE AS A KEY FACTOR FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL TOURIST DESTINATIONS. CASE STUDY: THE RICOTE VALLEY (MURCIA, SPAIN)

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This study investigates the conditions which a local community should fulfil in order to be receptive to the implementation of tourism development policies and to contribute to their success. To achieve the objectives of a tourism development plan, it is necessary to engage the entire local community and not just those directly involved in the industry, such as local government and business owners, but also residents.

A tourism development programme must be appraised to understand its benefits, but the majority of appraisal systems developed to date have proved to be inadequate, as they have focussed more on evaluating the results *a posteriori* than assessing the baseline context of the territory where the programme is being applied. If we act on the social environment and prepare the local community for a tourism project, the likelihood of success increases. The ideal situations are: actors who are willing to collaborate in the development; cooperation, understanding and awareness of the benefits of a tourism model; and the awareness that collaboration is fundamental. Local actors should consider and take responsibility for the future of their territory if sustainable long-term results are to be achieved. Marketing and infrastructure-related efforts are futile if there is not a suitable environment that fosters the creation of a competitive tourism product. This willingness of the local community should be appraised before and after the implementation of development programmes. Ex-ante appraisal is essential for correcting situations which could ruin the success of any investment.

Since the beginning of the LEADER community initiative, vast amounts of financial and human resources have been invested into the recovery of rural economies, but extensive fieldwork shows that the result is not proportional to the efforts invested. Investment into infrastructure and tourism promotion does not lead to a quality tourism product if there is no social base that facilitates its development.

To measure this social base, we have made use of societal response indicators which defined as the degree to which society responds to the tourist development of a territory, and includes the concepts of knowledge, acceptance, cooperation, facilitation and development support. The more these indicators are fulfilled in the destinations, the greater the success of the project. If we can influence them, we will be able to create an ideal context for tourism development, but this intervention should be orderly and sequential.

First we have defined the methodology used. Tourism is a social science, and as such cannot be explained only with quantitative data, so we have used a variety of methods that allowed us to scrutinise the territory and all the actors involved in tourism development: direct observation, surveys with residents and visitors, individual interviews and focus groups being the methods used. This methodology was applied in a particular territory in the Region of Murcia, the Ricote Valley, a tourist region formed by six small villages with just 25,000 inhabitants in total. The rural communities are crisscrossed by the River Segura, with all of them located on the banks of the river, except for the mountain village of Ricote. The area has a very diverse landscape characterised by a contrast between lush cultivated land and arid mountains, both dotted with traces of the coexistence of Muslim and Christian cultures. The Ricote Valley is a unique area beyond the villages as such and, despite the efforts made, the truth is that the biggest investments were channelled into the infrastructure of the individual municipalities, failing to create a true destination product.

The information obtained was then analysed, thereby identifying the response indicators that measure the attitude of the local population to tourism development. These indicators were grouped into eight categories:

1. Composition of the tourist destination
2. Attraction and potential of the tourism resources of the destination
3. Complementarity with other nearby tourist destinations
4. Positive synergy of the cooperation among all villages to create and promote a unified tourist destination
5. Residents' attitudes to tourism development and the creation of a unified tourist destination
6. Cooperation between tourism stakeholders on a municipal level and as a tourist destination
7. Attitude of regional and local authorities to tourism development and to cooperation between municipalities
8. Other aspects not covered in the above points

The indicators were ranked according to their priority. We have distinguished the priority of importance: all indicators are important and necessary for the success of a tourism development plan, but their fulfilment is sequential. The concept of priority indicates the sequence in which they should be addressed. Not only is it important to set aside the indicators that reflect the societal response status of a destination, but also - for the sake of their usefulness - it is necessary to prioritise their fulfilment. This is because the fulfilment of one indicator often requires the fulfilment of the previous one.

The degree of fulfilment of these indicators in the analysed area was considered with a view to comparing them with their ideal priority values. Therefore, a priority / fulfilment matrix was developed, allowing us to compare standards with the actual values of the destination and to measure deviations. This method provides the tourism planner with a useful tool to design the order of actions within a tourism development plan

In short, the area can be said to lack a comprehensive vision of the characteristics of a tourist destination and the mechanisms to ensure that responsibility is taken for its future tourism development. This situation can be overcome with training and independent external leadership, without non-economic political interests, which encourage local communities to participate in defining the tourism model, and therefore to understand its benefits. The strategic management of a tourist destination requires the pooling of ideas between citizens and public administrators. The tourism industry needs to be sensitive to the needs of the local community and should, at large, be accepted by it. The involvement of the community in establishing the desired conditions is perhaps the single most important factor for managing tourism development.

To end, the indicators were regrouped in order of priority of fulfilment to establish an orderly and useful hierarchy of the achievement of societal response indicators to ensure the success of a tourist destination.



