

Community participation in the development of tourism: a case study of three parishes in the Peneda Gerês National Park

CARLOS FERNANDES * [cfernandes@estg.ipv.pt]

JONATHAN EDWARDS ** [jedwards@bournemouth.ac.uk]

ROGER VAUGHAN *** [rvaughan@bournemouth.ac.uk]

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Objectives | The overall purpose of this study is twofold. First, to critically examine and compare the attitudes to involvement, in and perceptions of residents of selected rural communities in the Peneda Geres National Park. Secondly, to determine resident perceptions of the contribution of local associations and the National Park Authority to the tourism development process.

Methodology | A survey in the form of a structured face-to-face interview was undertaken to analyse the perceptions of members of the communities toward tourism development by identifying the obstacles and impediments to community participation. A total of 346 usable questionnaires were collected using a randomly selected sample of residents in the parishes of Castro de Laboreiro, Entre-Ambos-os-Rios and Vilar da Veiga. These three selected parishes illustrate the variety of experiences faced by communities involved with tourism.

Main results and contributions | The results of this study indicated there was no significant relationship between association membership and levels of education, employment type, occupation or full or part time employment. Very few returning migrants are bringing any kind of experience that may improve capacity building and possibly contribute to community development. Hence, there appears to be little or no role of return migrants as agents of social change, no charismatic entrepreneur or emerging enterprise culture to contribute to community development. Residents need to be motivated to participate and not feel a sense of helplessness, the fatalistic idea that little can be accomplished, thus engagement is not worth the time and effort. The literature also pointed out that in remote rural areas, similar to the study region of this research, there is not a strong will to engage in local development work and associational life. The findings reported here are inconsistent with the literature – the length of residence is not significantly related to attitudes to tourism development. In addition, the length of residence is not significantly related to attitudes to role of the National Park or attitudes to community solidarity.

* **PhD in Tourism** by Bournemouth University (UK) and **Professor** at Polytechnic Institute of Viana do Castelo.

** **PhD** by University of Hertfordshire and **Reader in Tourism** at Bournemouth University (UK).

*** **PhD** by Edinburgh University and **Professor** (Chair in Tourism Economics) at Bournemouth University (UK).

Findings suggest that attitudes to tourism development are related to involvement in tourism.

Residents of all three communities see tourism as the only and the best way for local development. They all share an enthusiasm for tourism and have ideas and wishes in mind for the development of tourism. The majority of respondents were unconcerned about the effects of tourism on their community and the surrounding environment. They also believe that tourism will only bring positive benefits for their community and are not aware of the benefits and costs of tourism development.

No attempt was made by the National Park authorities to contribute to community development and that tourism development was discouraged.

Appropriate forms of promoting local initiative needs to be identified.

Locally prevailing setting of rivalry and parochial thinking turned out to be an impediment to development.

Traditional gender roles in the community are an obstacle to tourism development.

Limitations | The use of face-to-face interviewing using a set of predetermined and piloted questions' proved suitable for residents who were at first reluctant to participate. This initial hesitation is believed to be due, among other factors, to the low level of educational opportunity. People felt incapable of comprehending some of the questions.

Despite repeated visits, not all households were represented as its members could not be reached.

There is still a tendency for male domination in the socio-economic and political life of the community, which tends to limit the entrepreneurship of a potential stakeholder – the women.

There are a number of methodological limitations of using quantitative data when studying the role of community-based associations in community and tourism development. Some of these limitations could be overcome by the application of a qualitative dimension to gain greater insights into the history of membership and the reasons for joining / not joining associations both without and within the community and the level of active membership.

Conclusions | Findings from the interviews were identified which serve to illustrate participatory development as a complex and difficult though essential for community development in remote rural areas. Based on the findings, several recommendations on structural policies and advice on approach and issues in terms of research are made.

Local authorities and/or the National Park authorities should encourage specific policies and initiatives to increase the access of the poor segments of the communities to the economic benefits of tourism.

This study argues that a major barrier to community development is the absence of an explicit communication policy between the various stakeholders.

As this study is based on community development with an emphasis on tourism in a National Park region it would be advisable to start sustainable tourism development based on a regional strategy, but from a bottom-up, community approach.

Professional development and training has been limited to community members whom are known for their lack of entrepreneurship.