THE POTENTIAL OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN VILNIUS DISTRICT MUNICIPALITY

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Community-based tourism has become an important part of tourism research worldwide. In Lithuania, however, it has not gained much academic attention yet. With this study, the authors try to deliver more knowledge on the subject in their home country. The aim of the study is to examine the potential of community-based tourism in Vilnius district municipality, as well as to propose measures to ensure its feasibility. A qualitative approach is used. The data mainly comes from literature review and semi-structured interviews. The research reveals a number of issues that need to be addressed and tackled if a community-based tourism is sought. Therefore, a number of corresponding measures are proposed.

Keywords: community-based tourism, local community, tourism development, Vilnius region.
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Introduction

Local community is increasingly being recognized as a major player in decision-making about tourism development and the future direction of tourism (Pearce, 1999; Mason, 2003; Telfer, 2008). A few years ago UNEP and WTO (2005) published a document “Making tourism more sustainable: guide for policy makers” which goes on to identify 12 aims that represent an agenda for sustainable tourism. It is evident that most of the aims such as social equity, visitor fulfilment, local control, community wellbeing and cultural richness are hardly achievable without an involvement of host communities.

Community-based tourism is usually (and in this study) understood as a means of development whereby the social, environmental and economic needs of local residents are met through the offering of a tourism product. Here tourism activities are developed and managed for the most part by local people and their participation is encouraged. A substantial amount of benefits remains within local economy. Moreover, a special emphasis is placed on preservation and reinforcement of the local cultural and natural heritage (Hatton, 1999).

There is a large amount of theoretical and case studies on community-based tourism worldwide. In Lithuania, this field of research is also getting more and more academic attention. Here, the development of rural communities has been given a particular interest (Atkočiūnienė, 2004; Aleksandravičius, 2011). The rural community role in sustainable tourism development has also received some attention (Atkočiūnienė, 2009). The existing research refers to a considerable potential for community-based tourism development in the country. For instance, it has been noticed that rural areas beside their industrial functions tend more and more to administer additional functions such as the preservation of natural and cultural heritage (Adamoničienė,
According to V. Atkočiūnienė (2010), communities that live in the neighbourhood of big cities have a great tourism potential in particular.

With this study, the authors tried to deliver more knowledge on the subject for both practical and theoretical purposes. Moreover, the authors had a personal feeling that local communities in Lithuania are not sufficiently involved in the development of tourism, and therefore proposals for the government and communities are needed. Vilnius district municipality was chosen for two main reasons: 1) its potential to be an appropriate place for community-based tourism practices as it is likely to have enough natural and cultural resource, and is in the vicinity of a large tourism market – Vilnius; and 2) the authors’ familiarity and knowledge of the place since they have lived in the area for years.

The aim of the study is to examine the potential of community-based tourism in Vilnius district municipality, as well as to propose measures to make this activity feasible.

Methodology. A qualitative approach was chosen. The study applied both primary and secondary sources to collect the data needed. The primary data was gathered in May 2011 by the use of semi-structured interviews. The chairmen of all officially registered social community associations within the area (33 in total) were questioned. It was assumed that local community leaders are the best informed people on local matters, and therefore are the most valuable source of knowledge on the subject investigated. The interviews were aimed to learn about the local attitudes and intentions towards tourism development in the area, and find out the main obstacles for community-based tourism in the area. The secondary data such as subject-related books, articles and studies were mainly used to get a general knowledge on the present and future potential of community-based tourism worldwide and, specifically, in Vilnius district municipality. All the data gathered was supposed to contribute to the definition of the overall potential of community-based tourism development in the locality, and the corresponding proposals.

Results

Secondary research

Host communities are often referred to as the basic resource for tourism (Murphy, 1985; Blank, 1989), for many tourists like to experience the local culture, language, traditions, lifestyles and natural environment of a destination they visit. These elements are often packaged and sold both by local residents and by external tourism agents under various labels such as cultural tourism, heritage tourism, village tourism, community-based ecotourism, etc. (Telfer, 2008).

A considerable number of global tourism trends such as the increasing demand for authentic experiences, “info-tainment” or “edu-tainment”, health-enhancing activities, “green” and eco-tourism (Cooper, 2006; Telfer, 2008) point to the great potential for community-based tourism development. The long-running worldwide economic, political and climatic unrest might urge more and more people to choose travel domestically. This could raise the popularity of local communities and their tourism
resource. Even the contradictory process of globalization has some positive implications for community tourism development. There is a view that globalization has revived regional or local identity. According to Richards and Hall (2000), regions are asserting their identity as a means of preserving their cultural heritage and developing their socio-economic potential. In such a way the selling of regional or local identity has become an important part of the tourism product.

Tourism resources that exist within the communities vary from place to place. However, some generalities can be noted. The main visitor attractions in urban areas tend to be local activity places (e.g. cultural, sport and amusement facilities) and their leisure setting (physical characteristics and socio-cultural features), whereas in rural areas the emphasis shifts to nature-based attractions (e.g. rivers, hills, forests) that act as a setting for various leisure pursuits. As for socio-cultural features, rural communities offer a great deal of interest for tourists, with their folklore, customs, cuisine, crafts, language and friendly atmosphere. Other types of tourism resource such as services (e.g. accommodation, shopping, markets) and infrastructure (e.g. transportation, information offices, parking) also differ – the choice of services and the complexity and diversity of the infrastructure being available to tourists will diminish as one moves from an urban to rural environment (Boyd, 2003).

In the case of Vilnius district municipality, it is largely made of rural areas with more than 1,000 villages, 4 towns and 1 city. The city of Nemencine contains around 6000 inhabitants while population in the towns of Bezdonys, Sumskas, Mieckunai and Maisiagala ranges from 800 to 1600. The overall population of the area is approximately 100,000. It is the most ethnically variegated municipality in Lithuania, where the Polish make 61.3 %, Lithuanians – 22.4 %, Russians – 8.4 %, Byelorussians – 4.4 % and the rest 3.5% are shared amongst Ukrainians, Tartars, Jewry and others (LSD, 2011; VRS, 2011).

A recent study on tourism potential in Vilnius district municipality (Atkulos projektai, 2008), ordered by the local government, has demonstrated a significant amount of cultural heritage in the locality. According to the study, in 2008 the area possessed 108 objects of archeological value (e.g. mounds, barrows, old manor places, ancient settlements), 36 objects of architectural value (e.g. churches, manor houses, Struve geodesic arc point), 15 burial-grounds, 11 sacral-mythological stones and many other sites of interest. Moreover, the study has also noted a huge potential of creativity amongst local residents many of whom still cherish the traditional arts and crafts (e.g. palm weaving, ceramics, woodworking).

Natural resources in Vilnius district municipality, as described in the above-mentioned study, “are large enough but not exceptional” (Atkulos projektai, 2008, p. 20). The most important of them, in regard to tourism, are water bodies and forests taking in 2.4 % and 38 % of the total regional area (VRS, 2011). The country’s second longest river Neris and its tributaries Vilnia, Voke, Duksta and Zeimena are well-suitable for water tourism, whereas the 113 lakes and 9 ponds are best for recreation and amateur fishing. Local forests, apart from usual recreational activities, could also serve for commercial hunting (Atkulos ..., 2008). The distinctive landscapes, flora and fauna of the Neris regional park are just a few more examples of the possible local community tourism resource.
Thus, the above-noted global trends and the brief characterization of Vilnius district municipality and its most important tourism resources suggest that the area has a considerable potential for community-based tourism. That is in theory. In order to get a more realistic view on this matter, the authors carried out an empirical investigation based on interviews with leaders of the local communities.

**Primary research**

Interviews with chairmen of the local communities revealed the following. Activities of the local communities in Vilnius district municipality are diverse, however, some of them happen more often than others. They are:

1) organisation of religious and cultural feasts and events of local significance;
2) clearing-up of the residential environment;
3) development and quality improvement of local infrastructure;
4) organization of leisure time activities for local residents, especially young people;
5) help on everyday agricultural and domestic matters.

None of the communities have identified tourism as their priority. Nearly half of the inquired local leaders have acknowledged that this possibility has not been considered at all. Some of those communities are not interested in developing tourism because they simply do not want more visitors to their place; others have just started to act collectively, and therefore are more concerned about things like community building or finding a permanent place for social meetings; the remaining communities have not discussed tourism merely because they lack local initiatives or do not believe their place to have tourism potential.

Communities that considered their participation in tourism development reported a number of difficulties they have confronted with. Here are the problems that were mentioned most often:

1. *Disagreement with the local government.* The disagreement arises for two main reasons: personal, when local officials are simply inactive or have a different point of view; and political, when local officials intentionally block some of the local community initiatives purely for political reasons. The latter reason is largely caused by continuing confrontation between various, on the basis of nationality found, political parties. Therefore, cases when governmental decisions are made on the basis of nationality are common. Time after time such attitude provokes national tensions amongst the locals. Nevertheless, most of the time they live friendly and that is just politicians who stir up the trouble.

2. *Lack of communal land.* The price of land in Vilnius district municipality is relatively high and local land-owners, as a rule, have no desire to use it for social needs. The state-owned land is often unsuitable for tourism developments. The better pieces of it are, again, too expensive. Taking out a lease could be an option. However then, it is not easy to find someone who wants to invest in it.

3. *Lack of finance.* EU normally does not sponsor the acquisition of land, and therefore the possession of finance is crucial. Moreover, funds to build, purchase or
maintain other tourism related assets such as hotels, restaurants and leisure facilities are also needed.

4. Apathy and lack of initiative amongst local residents. In most cases the community leaders associated these problems with the lack of free time among community members. A complaint that people are not eager to allocate their leisure time for communal matters, for they have other obligations (e.g. families, friends and alternate jobs) was heard on many occasions. According to the respondents, the majority of locals usually agree that one or another job needs to be done, but when it comes to doing it, nobody is there.

5. Lack of sociality and solidarity. The above-mentioned apathetic and non-initiative attitude of locals also point to other problems such as lack of sociality and solidarity. The latter is also weakened by the already-noted national polarization.

One more problem to be mentioned is a lack of qualified specialists. It appears that it does not require much effort to find someone for building a bench or planting a tree. However, it is rather complicated to find the right people to help with more serious projects.

Despite all this, there are a few communities that little by little are getting involved in tourism development in the area. For instance, the local community of Sumskas town is currently working on cultural tourism projects; the residents of Buivydziai are planning mass cultural events and intending to utilize their natural resources to attract visitors to the area; the community of Mickunai is committed to provide all the needed infrastructure and service for water tourists who pass the town on the river Vilnia. Currently we can only guess whether these plans will be implemented. Even if so, will it be a true community-based tourism in which the major role and benefits belong to the local people? It is hard to say.

Conclusions

General tourism trends and extensive local tourism resource suggest the great potential for community-based tourism development in Vilnius district municipality.

The activities of local communities in Vilnius district municipality are diverse, however, they are rarely tourism related. Even if they are, in most cases, they have only local significance, and therefore do not attract many visitors.

It can be said that at present there is no local community in the entire Vilnius district municipality that is actively involved in tourism business. Such situation is conditioned by a number of problems that arise within and around the communities. These are the main of them: 1) disagreement with the local government; 2) lack of communal land; 3) lack of finance; 4) apathy and lack of initiative; and 5) lack of sociality and solidarity.

Despite all the above-mentioned difficulties, the overall setting for community-based tourism in the area is still more favorable than not. However, a number of appropriate actions are needed. Here are some of them.

The communities should: 1) promote sociality among their members; 2) seek for collaboration and partnership with potential stakeholders such as governmental and non-governmental organizations, tourism industry representatives, the media,
other private and public entities; 3) encourage and motivate their members to develop competence in the field of tourism, business, public administration, etc.; 4) resurrect and cherish local cultural and natural heritage; and 5) look for the best practice examples and follow them.

The government should: 1) ease funding for community-based tourism projects; 2) improve conditions on the state-owned land acquisition by local communities; 3) find ways to avoid inactive and dishonest local officials (direct elections could be one of the solutions); 4) educate and consult local communities on community-based tourism, business, public administration and other related subjects; and 5) encourage collaboration and partnership between local communities, the government and other interest groups.

References

BENDRUOMENINIO TURIZMO VYSTYMO GALIMYBĖS VILNIAUS RAJONE

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Tyrimo eigoje paaiškėjo keletas bendruomeninio turizmo vystymo Vilniaus rajone stabdančių veiksnių, į kuriuos būtina atsižvelgti. Apskritai situacija plėtoti šios rūšies turizmui nagrinėjamoje vietoje gana palanki. Atsižvelgdami į tai, autoriai pateikia konkrečių priemonių dėl tam reikalingų priemonių.

Raktiniai žodžiai: bendruomeninis turizmas, turizmo vystymas, vietos bendruomenė, Vilniaus rajonas.

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