

Indicators for sustainable tourism

The case of Cambodia

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Abstract: Most research on tourism in Cambodia so far has focused on growth. There is very limited research on indicators for sustainability. A failure to create indicators for sustainable tourism may lead to short-term growth but the country will suffer in the long run. Sustainability really matters in tourism especially in a new destination like Cambodia. Cambodia has no clear indicators determining tourism sustainability. Cambodia's tourism is remarkably flourishing, but behind this growth some challenges exist: Cultural and environmental impacts, economic leakage, sex tourism, drug trafficking and disease transmission. These concern tourism sustainability. This research intends to fill a significant gap regarding challenges hampering sustainable tourism, particularly creating indicators, by studying the activities of Cambodia's tourism. The aim is to contribute to developing more comprehensive policies and measures that address problems by drawing on the activities and perspectives of the country's tourism stakeholders: These include public and private actors, NGOs, local people and tourists.

Keywords: indicator, sustainable tourism, tourism stakeholders, perspective, policy

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Sustainability increasingly matters in tourism, especially in new destinations like Cambodia. Cambodia's tourism is currently flourishing but some challenges exist: These include cultural and environmental impacts, economic leakage, sex tourism, especially children, illegal drug trafficking and disease transmission. All of these points relate to tourism sustainability. Cambodia has not yet developed indicators for sustainable tourism. Proper indicators are urgently needed for the country to sustain this country's booming sector. At the moment, tourism is being developed and flourishes without direction. As supported by Ericson and Rönning (2008) it can be argued that without clear indicators, sustainable tourism development is non-existent and can any development can erase the country as a tourist destination from the world map. Seeing these concerns, conducting a study on sustainable tourism in Cambodia is essential to understand the depth and breadth of the tourism indicators and their challenges, and to contribute to the development of effective policies, measure and programs for sustainable tourism for the country.

This research intends to fill a significant gap about the challenges of sustainable tourism, particularly finding tourism indicators, by studying the activities in Cambodia's tourism. The aim is to contribute to the development of more comprehensive policies and measures that address the problems by drawing from the activities and perspectives of the country's tourism public (government), private (tourism business), International Organization (IO) and Non-Government Organization (NGO), local people and tourists. In Cambodia, the public sector is currently the monitor/ (law) enforcer with regard to tourism, the private sector is the operator/ implementer, NGOs and IOs are the observers, local people are the beneficiaries and tourists are the performers. Indicators are developed by assessing, among other things, how tourism is perceived as "sustainable" and what makes it "sustainable".

Figure 1: At Sihanoukville (beach tourism): Cambodia's beach has been included as the world's most beautiful bay and this is the only public beach (in the photo and around) that people can entertain while most of it is privatized by business tycoons.

Source: Nhep TINAT



Figure 2: At Sihanoukville (beach tourism): The products displayed at a beach of Sihanoukville. These are not local products. The revenues of sales will return to the neighboring countries where these products are produced.

Specific research aims

The study seeks to answer three key questions:

- 1) What are the indicators for sustainable tourism in Cambodia?
- 2) What are the challenges of sustainable tourism in Cambodia?
- 3) From these, how will Cambodia's tourism be sustained?

Data Collection & Analysis

Given the nature and scope of the proposed study, a qualitative study will be used as a research design. The study will rely on primary qualitative data collected from different sources, but particularly from the tourism stakeholders such as public and private actors, IOs and NGOs, local communities and people, and tourists. The primary data collection will involve in-depth interviews. These will probe major themes emerging from the data. In addition to primary qualitative data, an extensive literature review will be done to generate and analyze secondary data and compare my findings with existing knowledge.

A two-step technique will be used for collecting the data by in-depth in-

terviews. During a pilot study in November and December 2015, 15 of the 47 in the sample will be visited. This will provide an opportunity to talk to key informants so as to assess the feasibility of future interviews and make adjustment on the questionnaires if any, and to build relationships with potential participants. The approval of a detailed research ethics submission (to the relevant University ethics committee) in relation to the main task of (open-structured) interviews will be required before commencing the interviews with a total sample of 47. Fieldwork continue in January 2016 while other information and statistics are also collected.

A qualitative method will be used to interpret the data. This will involve reviewing the answers to see the trends and factors towards sustainability and finding appropriate indicators. This will be in line with the supported scholarly written documents in the same field.

Sample

In Cambodia interviews are planned

with a sample of 47 respondents: 3 government officials familiar with tourism, 15 people from the private sector and tourism businesses (hotels, travel agencies, and tourist transport companies), 3 IOs and 3 tourism NGOs, 3 community leaders and 15 people who are deeply involved in community tourism as well as tourists visiting the country.

Plan

The research will be carried out in three phases. In Phase 1 (the first year), the focus is on developing a detailed research proposal and conducting a pilot study in the target areas so as to assess the feasibility of the project and test the draft questionnaires. At this stage, between 10 and 15 participants will be informally interviewed, but no data will be collected. Subsequently, the proposal will be transformed into a PhD confirmation paper. In Phase 2 (the second year), extensive field work will be conducted for data collection. At this stage, literature review will be also extended. In Phase 3 (the third year), data analysis will be conducted.



Source: Nhep TINAT

Figure 3: At Ratanakiri (Eco-tourism): This is a natural lake called Boung Yaek Loam located at the Northeast of Cambodia. It would be a suitable location for eco-tourism. This is a question of sustainability.

Key research on indicators for sustainability

The WTO (2004) states that over 60 authors from more than 20 countries have conducted studies to find indicators of sustainable development for tourist destinations. This publication has served as the key research of indicators for sustainable tourism (WTO, 2004). Indicators first became a subject for attention from the tourism sector, as a response to the global focus on sustainability (Brundtland Commission, 1986 & Rio Earth Summit, 1992 in WTO, 2004, p. 13). WTO (2004) when it was argued that “in any destination, the best indicators are those which respond to the key risks and concerns regarding sustainability of tourism, and also provide information which can help clarify issues and measure responses” (WTO, 2004, p. 13). Indicators can make a difference in three main ways: through the information they generate; the partnerships they create; and the action they produce (WTO, 2004).

Indicators of sustainable development are needed to guide policies and decisions at all levels of society: vil-

lage, town, city, county, state, region, nation, continent and world. Finding an appropriate set of indicators of sustainable development for a community, a city, or a country is not an easy task. The number of representative indicators should be as small as possible, but as large as essential. Indicators condense its enormous complexity to a manageable amount of meaningful information, to a small subset of observations informing our decisions and directing our actions (Bossel, 1999). Indicators are the main evaluation tools used to support sustainable tourism policy implementation (Choi & Sirakaya, 2006 & Miller, 2001 in George A. et al., 2011, p. 4), and “indicators act as a catalyst to support a planning process” (Mascarenhas et al., 2010 in George A. et al., 2011, p. 4).

Indicators perform many functions. They can lead to better decisions and more effective actions by simplifying, clarifying and making aggregated information available to policy makers. They can help measure and calibrate progress towards sustainable development goals. They can provide an early warning to prevent economic, so-

cial and environmental setbacks. Indicators of sustainable development at the national level are often developed through dynamic interactive processes and dialogues among a wide range of stakeholders, including government representatives, technical experts and civil society representatives. The process allows participants to define sustainability from their own perspectives, taking locally relevant aspects as well as their own value systems into account (DiSano, 2007).

Even though sustainable tourism is studied in a globally widespread way and can therefore take different shapes, its indicators generally vary greatly or slightly from time to time and based geographical locations, this is not to mention political tendencies or affiliation. Sustainable tourism should encompass reasonable balance of three dimensions namely economic, socio-culture and environment. Therefore, balancing these three dimensions is critically important because they are core issues of sustainable tourism.

Socio-cultural dimension

Social indicators are related to so-

Figure 4: North-Gate, Angkor Wat



Source: Michael Waibel 2009

cial integrity that should be assessed in terms of the subjective well-being of the host population while cultural indicators should measure cultural integrity in terms of diversity, individuality and beauty of cultures and heritage (Jovicic & Ilicand, 2010). It is difficult to measure directly social and cultural sustainability because most of the variables related to these are qualitative rather than quantitative (Farsari & Prastacos, 2001). And the rising number of travelers who take holidays at sensitive areas such as nature and cultural buildings may jeopardize nature conservation and violate cultures. Loss of culture is one of the negative impacts of tourism. Tourists are often unwilling to completely adapt themselves to the local culture; therefore in order to keep the custom, local people must adjust to their needs. Tourists can also lead to vandalism and crime (Behrendt, 2012).

Environmental dimension

Environmental indicators should measure environmental quality and the demands made by tourists in terms of different environmental media: water, air, biodiversity, landscape etc. (Jovicic & Ilicand, 2010). The sustaina-

bility of tourism development can be strengthened by effective use of Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) as an obligation imposed on developers. It is an assessment of the possible positive or negative impact on the environment due to the development. The EIA can ensure that the environmental effects of major developments proposals are fully considered and understood before decisions are made on whether they should be proceed or not (Behrendt, 2012). The objective of sustainable tourism is to retain the economic and social advantages of tourism development while reducing or mitigating any undesirable impacts on the natural environment (Tourism Intelligence Unit, 2011). If we have learned to watch the relevant indicators, we can understand and cope with our dynamic environment (Bossel, 1999).

Economic dimension

Endeavour to balance between economic outcome and the negative impacts on tourism, is not yet possible worldwide. Economically, tourism is booming business. It produces almost 5% of the world's economy, employs around 200 million people worldwide

and is the fastest growing industry (Europarc Federation, 2012). Tourism development brings money to the region and improvements of the local facilities such as roads, water supplies, transportation system as well as electricity and telecom service. Tourism can also create new recreational or entertainment facilities, better health system, restaurants and other public spaces. The longer tourism thrives the more improvement will be made (Behrendt, 2012). According to the WTO (1998) as cited in Lin and Guzman (2007) claimed that tourism contributes over 2% of gross domestic product (GDP) and 5% of exports to the economies of 11 of the 12 developing countries that are home to 80% of the world's poor (WTO, 1998, in Lin and Guzman, 2007, p. 1). But economic leakage is the most pressing issue. Most of income generated will not shift to national budget but to the foreign countries since most investors are not Cambodians and local people get minimum benefits from this sector. Samdach Hun Sen, current Cambodian Prime Minister (2005) as cited in Chheang (2010) said that it is estimated that approximately 30% of revenue from tourism ... leaked out of

Figure 5: At Siem Reap (cultural tourism): A man is observing the sculpture on wall of Elephant Terrace, at the Angkor Wat complex which attracts millions of tourists per year.



Source: Nhep TINAT

the country through imported foreign goods to serve tourism sector in Cambodia (Chheang, 2010).

There are many hidden costs of tourism and they can have both bad and good (economic) effects. Often rich countries are better suited to profit from tourism than poor ones (Behrendt, 2012). The indicators, the linkages between tourism and the environment, social and cultural dimensions, are not easily available (Jovicic & Ilicand, 2010). Finally, efforts to assess great losses on tourism negative effects have been unsuccessful. What is apparent is that the revenues made from the industry greatly outweigh the resources devoted to it. Although the lost resources cannot be measured in monetary unit, countries may spend more billions to heal the spoilt resources than earn from the industry or, loss, in the worst scenario, loss cannot be replaced. Tourism business is profit-oriented: the greater profitability of the industry, the greater expenditures for its loss.

Sustainable tourism & its indicators: current knowledge

Beyond the above authors, there are many authors (whose work was

reviewed) arguing about the positive impacts of tourism. They discuss the number of job created, the amount of generated income, the number of tourist arrivals. It almost appears as though tourism were the main factor in economic development. They appear to suggest that tourism draws from renewable resources, in some extreme cases, a magic wand to help the welfare of the world population. However, many neglect the negative impacts of tourism on society. Some consider only what negative impacts there are and neglect the question of how to achieve sustainability in tourism. No single paper on tourism in Cambodia is devoted to "how" to make tourism sustainable, especially indicators for sustainable tourism development are lacking.

Indicators for sustaining Cambodia's tourism

The indicators and sustainability mentioned above do not fully reflect the tourism in Cambodia. The arguments are partly correct. Clear indicators determining sustainable tourism are not yet available in Cambodia, although the country has regarded tourism as the main income genera-

tor and attempts to sustain tourism. Cambodia's tourism has been threatened by remarkable challenges such as i) lack of tourism infrastructures/ facilities, ii) environmental degradation, iii) sex tourism, iv) weak carrying capacity, v) economic leakage, and vi) safety and security shortages (Tinat, 2011). Therefore, indicators for the country's tourism are not yet revealed unless a study is conducted.

Contribution and conclusion

The existing data is abundant in tourism but effected by many limitations in the indicators for it. First, the use of different sustainable tourism definitions by various studies makes accurate data comparison difficult. Second, due to the covert nature of indicators, effort to generate reliable estimations on the indicators of sustainable tourism and development is difficult for the country. Third, different methodologies have been employed in research on indicators for sustainable tourism. For instance, most of the commonly cited statistics on tourism sustainability were not based on the WTO definition. Additionally, many studies are based on a series of assumptions rather than evidence.

This resulted in different crude estimates on the number of indicators. Fourth, the reliability of the data is often questionable because different agencies involved in data collection have distinct agendas and interests which are compounded by different interests and agendas on the side of data suppliers. Finally, in some countries including Cambodia, a centralized data repository is not available, and as shown earlier on indicators for sustainability, is inconsistent and unreliable.

To date, the Ministry of Tourism in Cambodia has not commissioned a study to review any knowledge on useful tourism indicators for the country. Although the review by other scholars found an abundance of research on tourism and related issues, they have not produced a real accumulation of knowledge about the patterns, extent, and consequences of ways of sustaining tourism in Cambodia. The study concluded that most of the data collected by research conducted over the past decade in Cambodia were available but the information on indicators for sustainable tourism was patchy, inconsistent and not practical, and the studies were often confusing. There was a lack of independence in the research process because, in most cases, the studies reflected the program interests of the organizations working in this field or research-funded projects. Another pressing concern is that among all Development Partners (DP), only Asian Develop-

ment Bank (ADB) assisted the MOT to conduct a study on Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) Tourism Development Project (2010-2013) but the study was not totally concerned with Cambodia's tourism, this is not to mention about sustainable tourism per se. Tourism is the main income generator of the country but it is neglected by all DPs. In Cambodia, for instance, out of hundreds of tourism related studies that were reviewed in Tinat (2011) and this article, not a single one was fully devoted to studying what indicators used to sustain tourism.

These disadvantages have hampered sustainable tourism growth of the country where tourism is still rather new to the people, and questions on indicators for sustainability exist. Cambodia's tourism legal frameworks are scarce and, if exist, too broad for implementation or left unimplemented or loosely-regulated. Without proper indicators, this will result in the devastation of the country's tourism.

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