

New avenue for soio-economic development: alternative tourism

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Good afternoon, the Chairperson Prof Kshanika Hirimburegama, the dean of the faculty, distinguished professors and fellow lecturers and ladies and gentlemen. It is an honour to me to be invited as a plenary speaker to give a speech on New Avenue for Soio-Economic Development: Alternative Tourism.

Introduction

Today, tourism has become one of the most important economic sub-sectors in development of a country. In the world out of 12.4 jobs one is from the tourism sector. That information is from 2012. The fastest tourism growing area in the world is South East Asia and the Pacific with a growth rate of 14.5. After ending the 30-year civil war in Sri Lanka, in 2009 the tourism sector has grown significantly. Tourism has become a fast growing sector of the economy after ending the 30-year old civil war in the country, especially in the North and the East. It is proven that after 2009 May, the month the civil war was ended, tourist arrivals to the country increased rapidly. Tourist arrivals in 2009 were 447,890. It was increased by nearly 210,000 in 2010 and the total number of tourists visits to the country was 654,476, in 2011 it was 853,975. The number of tourists expected by the Tourist Board of Sri Lanka in 2016 is two million. It shows that the importance of tourism in development of a country's economy as a whole. However, from the recent past the tourism sector demonstrates the changes in traveling attitudes. Decrease in the seasonality feature of tourism and active holidays depending on culture, nature and traditional way of life have become the objectives of new tourists and the economic, social and environmental impacts on the area where the activities are taking place in.

Evolution of tourism

You know, the first tourism or the first trip as a tourist started in somewhere around 17th and 18th centuries, which was called the grand tour by the sons and daughters of the British elites through the Europe from London up to Rome. That took somewhere around six months to one year period. That's the beginning of western tourism. There may be eastern tourism before that. But it was the beginning of western tourism according to the definition 'tourism'. The first person who started tourism as a company was the famous Thomas Cook. That is one-day train excursion in 1841. And the first commercial trip to Europe started by the Thomas Cook and Company in 1855. In 2012 world tourism has been dominated by two major companies namely TUI Travel PLC and Thomas Cook Group PLC. TUI Travel PLC has managed 30 million customers

operated in 180 countries with 200 brands in 31 key source markets and had 54,000 employees. Thomas Cook Group PLC has managed nearly six million customers over 81 hotels having 700 travel shops and had nearly 15,000 employees. Both companies are operated from UK.

From mass tourism to alternative tourism

This information clearly indicates that how these multinational companies control the whole economy in tourism industry. Today, full package holiday approach of mass tourism is one of the negative factors affecting the economic survival of local small scale entrepreneurs, through its feature of leading the tourist stay in the facility during their holiday. Therefore, it needs following specific tourism development approaches distinct from mass tourism development for developing new sub-sectors of tourism, which is named as alternative tourism.

Most of these alternative tourism approaches are closely related with rural economy and thereby rural development. The main reason for this is tourist destinations of these alternative tourism approaches are rural areas. The alternative tourism approaches are namely: nature tourism, eco tourism, heritage tourism, agro tourism, farm tourism, religious tourism and many more. This alternative tourism creates a new economic opportunity in rural areas. This situation leads to the relationship between socio-economic development and tourism in rural areas. Further this economic relationship causes creating a number of tourism types in rural areas. However, alternative tourism activities are not limited only to tourism areas. Especially, types of tourism such as MICE tourism which is called meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions, war tourism, slum tourism, sports tourism are related to urban and suburban areas. Therefore, benefits of alternative tourism are definitely filtered to both rural and urban communities. The coming up Commonwealth conferences in Sri Lanka belong to the type of MICE tourism.

Sri Lanka's prospects in tourism

Considering the geographical features of the island, climatic variations within a shorter distances, rich bio diversity, rich historical and heritage values and delicious local cuisine, Sri Lanka can be an attractive tourist destination in the world. This tropical island has an exceptional bio diversity and rich cultural heritage with greatest potential for tourist attraction. According to the world famous handbook in tourism information, Lonely Planet, published in London, the best country for tourism in 2013 is Sri Lanka. The key

feature for high tourist attraction in Sri Lanka is tourism resources and destinations are located within a small geographical area. Therefore, distance and travel time between two destinations are minimized. Due to the fast road development in the country, travel time is much shorter than it was a decade before.

There are a number of opportunities in development of tourism sector in Sri Lanka, they can be listed as follows: peace and security established in the country after ending 30-year civil war, political stability, infrastructure development such as roads, electricity, water etc, newly introduced online visa system, less natural disasters compared to other competitors, low cost of living for tourists in the country and the hospitality of the people which is a heritage from generations.

Tourism versus alternative tourism

We will now see what tourism is and what alternative tourism is. Tourism fulfills a human need for rest and recreation. People normally set out to see other places and meet other people. Other people meanwhile extend their hospitality to their guests, a national trait worthy of praise. Nevertheless, tourism also satisfies the thirst for profit, big businesses, business hunger for mega buck profits. It resorts to gross commercialism and empowers unsuitable development programmes. In the process, people get trampled upon, cultures eroded and eco systems deteriorated. Developing countries such as Sri Lanka, main recipients of these development programmes usually end up the losers. Tanzania in Africa has gained a larger income from its tourism industry. However, considering the cultural degradation that happened due to mass tourism industry in the country, Mr Julius Nyerere, the first President of Tanzania once told "I don't want foreign countries to do this type of tourism which erodes the culture and human values of my people. I would like to stop it if this situation continues. That happened in Tanzania in the 1970s and 1980s.

Many developing countries in the early 70s hugged tourism as a quick receipt for development, confounding from high unemployment rates and heavy indebtedness. Many governments saw tourism as a source of foreign exchange to fund balance of payment deficiency and servicing their foreign debts. Tourism also promised a viable source of investment for their backward economies and source of quick livelihood and employment for their unskilled workers. From around 70 million people who spend a few billion dollars in the 1960s the number of tourists rose to nearly one billion spending US\$ 1.3 trillion in 2012. You can see what the share of economy by the tourism sector in the world is.

Unfortunately, the major part of this money goes back to the developed countries and multinational companies like Thomas Cook PLC and other big tourist companies. This is not understood by the people and the governments as

well as by the planners in the tourism sector. So why are we talking about alternative tourism? Alternative tourism emerged from the developing countries as a reaction to the negative effects of mass tourism heaped on them. Alternative tourism has a counter-trend and seeks to ride these abuses by challenging the profit structure and commercialism of the tourism industry.

Advantages of alternative tourism

Alternative tourism works to redefine tourism back to its original spirit of exchange and solidarity among peoples. This is a niche market. The evolution of the tourism industry has been anxious and to a large scale been dictated by the fluctuation of the socio-economic and political landscape of the world. Mass consumerism and mass tourism have been slowly given way to the personalized and costumer service offerings. Tourism industry has witnessed radical changes in the travel preferences as well as customer expectations. Niche tourism as it is recognized now has been embraced by both the travel operators and travelers alike and it is gradually being accepted as part of the main stream tourism. Digital and e-marketing tools and methodologies provide a perfect foil for this emerging and productive segment. Cultural tours, wine tours, tea tours, coffee tours, architectural wonder travels, forest tours are just some of the flavours of the alternative and niche tourism.

Types and benefits of alternative tourism

The sustained online marketing campaign is capable of creating unprecedented visibility for these travel treasure troves. Eco tourism, hot spring tours, adventure and heritage site travel, rain forest and back water travel and agro tourism are some of niche tourism concepts which are considered as alternative tourism. Types of alternative tourism: cultural tourism, eco tourism, community based tourism, culinary tourism, heritage tourism, medical tourism, wildlife, nature, wellness, geo tourism, slum tourism, religious tourism – our people are going to Buddhagaya and people who are going to Mecca, people who are going to Jerusalem, and this is a type of religious tourism. Pro-poor tourism, disaster tourism – people who are coming to disaster places and they spend money – sports tourism, doom tourism, MICE tourism, civic tourism and agro tourism are some examples for alternative tourism.

Further, alternative tourism is applied to tourism which does not damage the environment. This is ecologically sound and avoids the negative impacts of the large scale tourism development undertaken in areas which have not previously been developed. Alternative tourism is thought to consist of smaller scale development or attractions for tourists which are set in rural or communities and organized by them. These are seen as having zero negative effects-social or cultural and a better chance of being acceptable to the local people than mass tourism.

There is a question of who benefits. Certain kinds of tourism are called alternative because they are not exploitative of the local people because of the benefits flow to the local residents or in general to rural communities. On the contrary, conventional tourism demands large scale organization and resources not usually available locally or even in the host country. My professional definition for alternative tourism is every kind of tourism other than mass tourism, which respects and conserves the socio-cultural values of communities and helps to improve their economic standards. However, sex tourism and gambling tourism are course not included in alternative tourism. The reason is both types of tourism do not carry good values to the communities nor its environment.

It is true that there are also some constrains of alternative tourism. Alternative tourism in developing countries has been much more limited and less successful than mass tourism due to various reasons. Alternative tourism projects in the developing countries are frequently handicapped by the cost of international travel in the first place and poor local connections with destinations, in the second. Differences of culture and the standards of living of the host and guest are also constraints. Having mentioned about the constraints of alternative tourism, it is necessary to ask therefore, why we should promote alternative form of tourism. The answer would appear to lie in an assumption that the alternative forms of tourism and tourists will have fewer and less negative effects on destination areas and their populations without diminishing

the positive economic effects, that is achieving the best of all worlds.

I believe that both mass tourism and alternative tourism are needed in development of tourism in Sri Lanka. However, there is a big potential to develop alternative type of tourism in the country and it helps to filter the economic benefits of tourism to the economically handicapped communities too.

Conclusion

From the overall discussion, it would seem that mass tourism is an economically sound development area but it certainly makes damage to the socio-cultural values of the communities. Most of the decisions directed at mass tourism development arise because of the unplanned nature of the development, especially without paying serious concern to the environment and socio-cultural issues arising due to project implementation. More than three decades of experience suggests that true alternative tourism is one that not subject to profit motives of big business interest, alternative tourism also works for an empowered community that can reject development imposition of their lives. Only then we can really talk of having gone back to tourism's original spirit – that of exchange and solidarity among peoples. So that is cultural tourism, eco tourism, farm tourism, doom tourism, MICE tourism and sports tourism.

Thank you.