Tourism for Marginal Groups: Tourism as a Livelihood Strategy in an Indigenous Community in Taiwan

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Abstract

Since the report of the Brundtland Commission was published 1987 (WCED 1987), sustainable development has been incorporated into the policies of many international organizations and the legislation of jurisdictions throughout the world. Nevertheless, implementation has not been easy. It is not always clear what is to be sustained and at what scale, or whether the concept refers to a philosophy, a process, a program or a product, or all of these (Wall 1997, 2002). Furthermore, in mediating tensions between environment and economy, the role of culture is typically underplayed (Wall 1993).

Based on the general definition of sustainable development from the Bruntland Report, McMinn (1997) suggested that the term "sustainable tourism" (development) simply limits the meaning to those particular elements associated with tourism. Such a description is vague and encourages people question its value. As Wall (1991) has pointed out, *Our Common Future* (WCED, 1987) does not make any reference to tourism and tourism resources, and there has been confusion and disagreement over what the principles of sustainable development really are in the context of tourism and how they may put into practice (Wheeller, 1993; Clarke, 1997; Stabler, 1997). This is because applying principles relating to a single sector, such as tourism, ignores the fact that sectors compete for the use of scarce resources and a single sector could be sustained but, at the same time, sustainable development, when more generally conceived, could be undermined. Thus, a single-sector approach is unrealistic and sustainability is unlikely to be achieved through such a narrow perspective (Butler, 1998).

Acknowledgement of the importance of the links between tourism and other activities leads to the conclusion that tourism should be seen as a tool for development and not end in itself (McCool and Moisey, 2001). It may be pertinent to ask whether and in what forms tourism might contribute to sustainable development. Such a perspective acknowledges that tourism is unlikely to be the sole user of resources and that a balance should be sought between tourism and other existing and potential activities. It also recognizes that tourism may not be necessary for sustainable development and that the reduction of tourism may be a legitimate goal in certain circumstances.

It is suggested that a sustainable livelihood (SL) approach (Scoones, 1998) may offer a practical

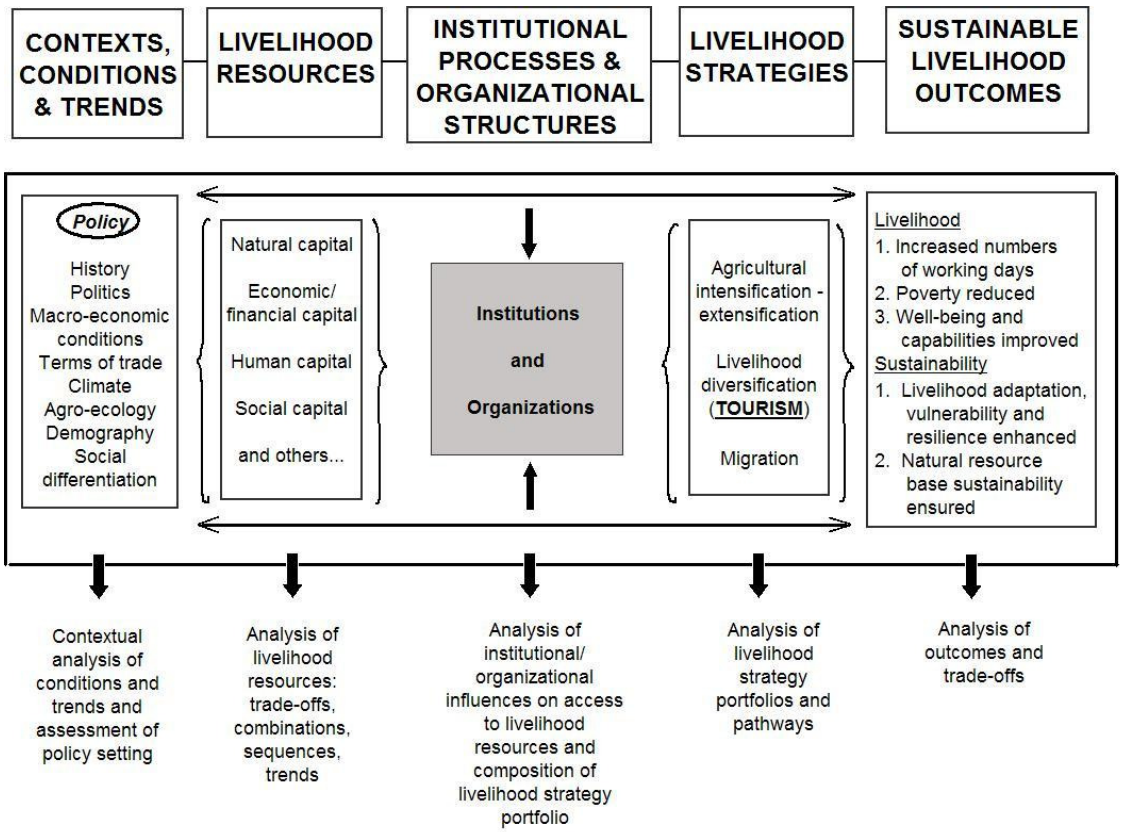
way forward. It is useful because it acknowledges that, particularly in poor communities, people gain their livelihoods through multiple activities rather than one formal job and new initiatives do not occur in a *tabula rasa* but, like much tourism, must be incorporated into an existing system. In addition, it is a more tangible concept and is relatively easy to comprehend and use to guide research and practice. SL procedures usually involve an assessment of community activities, assets, capabilities, adaptive strategies and technologies, all of which contribute to their livelihood systems (IISD 1999). SL thinking is based on a people-centred paradigm which emphasizes inherent capacities and local knowledge systems. It builds on the belief that sustainable development can only be achieved by if the needs and interests of poor and marginalized communities are met (Chamber 1986).

If communities decide to incorporate tourism as one of their livelihoods in order to achieve sustainable development, tourism will be a form of livelihood diversification. Such diversification can have many advantages and tourism can become: (1) a means to enable accumulation (e.g., income) for consumption and investment; (2) a means to help spread risk; (3) an adaptive response to longer-term declines in income entitlements, due to serious economic or environmental changes beyond local control; and /or (4) a means to take pressure off fragile lands and increase household incomes for purchase of additional food or payment of school fees. The last advantage features a non-farm livelihood pattern using human (i.e., labour) and economic (i.e., employment related to tourism) assets as a means to *further improve* the financial /economic asset base (i.e., income, savings, investment) as well as other dimensions of the existing stock of human assets (i.e., health, education) (Hussein and Nelson, 1998; UNDP & Wanmali, 1999).

In order to illustrate the SL approach and to highlight the role of tourism as one among many livelihood strategies, this presentation examines how a Cou indigenous community in Shanmei, Taiwan, secures their livelihoods by using SL framework as a guiding tool (Figure 1). The community is located in a remote area in the mountainous interior of Taiwan. The study site was chosen because people in Shanmei depend upon multiple livelihood resources and Cou culture has many implications for the way tourism development is being done. It will be demonstrated how tourism and associated community-based resource management initiatives can “fit in” with existing activities in a rural economy. The study also identifies the types of assets people use and also how existing livelihoods can be strengthened through the introduction of new economic activities, such as tourism, and corresponding economic and social investments (UNDP and Wanmali, 1999). The livelihoods and priorities of individuals, households and a community are assessed, and the many positive and negative consequences of tourism initiatives are identified. In additional aim is to try to understand tourism from an indigenous perspective and to examine how tourism can be introduced in ways that enhance local livelihoods with acceptable associated adverse consequences.

The case of Shanmei reveals that local residents consider tourism is a risky activity and so far it has not replaced other forms of livelihood sustenance, especially in this marginal community in relatively remote location. In such places, many individuals are sustained by combinations of livelihood strategies, both subsistence and market-oriented and, rather than specific jobs. Thus, it is particularly important that tourism complement rather than replace existing livelihood sources leading to diversification of livelihood strategies. Therefore, advocates of sustainable development should not emphasize the maintenance of tourism over an indefinite period of time. Rather, their aims would be better served by exploration of how tourism might fit into a suite of livelihood strategies, contributing to the achievement of sustainable livelihood outcomes. The approach that has been taken in this paper is different from that reported in most tourism literature which only addresses tourism. The strength of the sustainable livelihood approach is that it encourages the adoption of a broad perspective from which to examine the consequences of tourism. Tourism should not be considered as a panacea for all of the problems in indigenous communities. It is not a reliable source of income in many marginal economies but it may supplement incomes derived in other ways and help to disperse the risk.

Figure 1: Sustainable Rural Livelihoods: A Framework for Analysis



Source: Scoones, 1998, p.4

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