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Ecuador's Community-Based Tourism: Policies and Practices on the Ground

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Title: Ecuador's Community-Based Tourism: Policies and Practices on the Ground

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Abstract:

Community-based tourism (CBT) is an alternative form of tourism that emerged out of bottom-up development efforts and is widely used by governments, NGOs, and development agencies to foster community empowerment and development. While promising wider socio-economic benefits (Zapata et al., 2011), at the same time CBT is often criticised for its tokenistic nature, for creating local inequalities, and for being used as a political tool by governments in the developing world (Dolezal, 2015).

This paper is based on a project which investigates the governmental structures and the local realities of CBT in Ecuador. It presents insights from the early conceptual stage of a collaborative research project which seeks to comprehend the relationship between CBT policies and practice—that is, the government's conceptualisations of CBT and how these are reshaped on the ground. It questions to what degree the structural conditions created by the government enable or hinder empowerment and the articulation of agency of those residents for whom CBT turns into a new livelihood strategy. Although the term empowerment is used with high frequency within tourism for development, it has also been found that the possibilities for empowerment through CBT are highly unequal in the vastly heterogeneous communities where CBT happens (Blackstock, 2005). What is more is that CBT is often used as a political tool, with dominant discourses imposed on communities, creating disempowering structural conditions that impact residents' agency (Dolezal, 2015). This research therefore problematizes the word "empowerment" and sheds light on the complex power relations between government and residents, revealing how policies shape practices and opportunities on the ground.

In Ecuador, the geographical context of this research, CBT has been closely linked with socio-political struggles and the Indigenous movements and mobilisations in the 1990s. Indeed, the Ecuadorian Plurinational Federation of Community-Based Tourism (FEPTCE) indicates that CBT is a mechanism for the social inclusion of Indigenous communities that were exploited as tourist attractions and historically marginalised from tourism revenues (FEPTCE, 2010). In the Santa Elena province, there are two versions of CBT. In the first version, CBT is managed on a whole-commune basis through the communal tourism committee, charging a fee for each visitor. The second version relates to the communes settled on the coastal fringe, where the tourism resource is mainly the beaches, which are not community-owned. As a consequence, CBT has been developed on a family basis, in which families participate in the programs set up by NGOs. However, the National Regulation for Community-Based Tourism Centres (Mintur, 2010) only recognises the first way to engage in CBT, leaving entire communes outside of the law.

These two different contexts therefore create different power structures between government and residents, and ultimately different opportunities on the ground, which deserve closer investigation. The data is planned to be collected by drawing on ethnographically oriented methods, including semi-structured interviews and participant observation, starting in summer 2017. In so doing, this research seeks to reveal the degree to which the government's actions hinder or enable residents' agency in engaging in CBT in Ecuador to ultimately create

possibilities for empowerment through tourism and to inform tourism policy in Ecuador.

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