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Giang Thi Phi
Griffith University

Michelle Whitford
Griffith University

Dianne Dredge
Aalborg University

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Rethinking Social Sustainability in Tourism Social Entrepreneurship: A Case of Microfinance Tourism

Giang Thi Phi (Griffith University, Australia), Michelle Whitford (Griffith University, Australia), and Dianne Dredge (Aalborg University, Denmark)

Social entrepreneurship in tourism is increasingly gaining global attention as a growing band of social entrepreneurs introduce innovative approaches to organise tourism resources as a means to realise socio-economic sustainability. Indeed, these social entrepreneurs are leading the way for the utilisation of tourism as a vehicle to tackle persistent local issues that the public, private and third sectors have previously overlooked or, for various reasons, not been able to deal with effectively and/or appropriately.

Tourism social innovations however, exist within a local-global context with a very diverse range of factors influencing motives, many of which prioritise commercial and for-profit values over the initial social missions and/or ethics of care. This economic focus poses significant challenges to the stakeholders involved to maintain a socially responsible approach to tourism innovation over both time (e.g. advent of new staff) and space (e.g. set-up in a new location). The concept of social sustainability therefore, is re-defined here not simply as the positive social impacts brought about by tourism within a community, but rather how ethics of care and social missions of tourism social entrepreneurship approaches can be sustained.

A case study was employed to better understand microfinance tourism [MFT], an approach underpinned by social entrepreneurship, combining microfinance and tourism for poverty alleviation. 12 key informants from six different MFT organisations were interviewed regarding the socially responsible, global development of MFT. The results revealed that two key mechanisms facilitate the social sustainability of MFT: (1) internal incentives that encourage MFT staff to preserve social values; and (2) external development of a global community of MFT-related stakeholders for crowd-development of global MFT ethical standards and crowd-monitoring to reinforce ethical standards on participating MFT organisations.

The findings of this research provide significant lessons for the development of social entrepreneurship in tourism by highlighting the need and mechanisms for maintaining a focus on social sustainability in its broader sense.