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VOLUNTOURISM AS A PRO-POOR TOURISM: A CASE OF VOLUNTEER TOURISM IN THAILAND

Abstract:

Volunteer tourism or voluntourism is a relatively new form of tourism which is viewed as a means for poverty reduction or an approach for pro-poor tourism in the developing countries. The primary aim of this research was to examine the role of volunteer tourism in poverty alleviation. It employed an interpretive paradigm utilizing qualitative data collection methods including semi-structured interviews and participant observation. The informants included twelve volunteer tourists who were on a working vacation in Thailand, and fifteen local residents in Thailand in the communities where volunteer tourism activities took place. The findings of the research indicate that in the point of view of both the volunteer tourists and the local residents, volunteer tourism could be used as an effective means to help reduce the state of poverty in the local communities. Specifically, volunteer tourism activities helped transfer of wealth as well as better skills and knowledge from rich or developed countries to poor or developing countries. It was also perceived as a means for providing unfortunate local people with an opportunity to learn English which will enable to have a better life in the future. The research findings provide tourism practitioners, especially those related to volunteer tourism, with insights on how to organize volunteer tourism in the way that that poor people can truly benefit from such tourism activity.

Keywords:

Volunteer Tourism, Pro-Poor Tourism, Poverty Reduction

JEL Classification: Y90, A10

Background and Significance

According to the report conducted by the National Strategies for Sustainable Development (NSSD), there are around 1.3 billion people spend their lives with extremely poverty condition. These people spend less than $1 a day. Poverty alleviation has become a significance issue that needs a special and immediate attention. The Asian Development Bank defines 'poverty' as "deprivation of essential assets and opportunities to which every human is entitled". (Suntikul, Bauer, and Song, 2009, p.154) where as Cattarinich (2001, p.1) defines it as "a multidimensional phenomenon that consists of a 'lack' of certain things upon which human health, well-being, and autonomous social functioning depend, including the ability to meet 'basic needs' (e.g. food, shelter, clothing etc.)".

The main goal of the United Nations was to halve the proportion of people living in extreme poverty by 2015. (Ashely, Boyd, and Goodwin, 2000; NSSD, 2008). To respond to this goal, a number of approaches have been developed by organizations and agencies (Ashely et al., 2000). Governments and donors in many countries, especially developing and poor countries respond to this goal by developing strategies to help and develop the lives of the poor people (Ashley et al., 2000). They also utilize certain forms of tourism to help alleviate the poverty in countries such as community-based tourism and volunteer tourism (Luekveerawattana, 2012).

Volunteer tourism is a relatively new form of tourism. It is a type of holiday in which tourists spend part of their vacation helping people in the community they visit. Volunteer tourism is considered a pro-poor tourism or as a means to help the poor people. This is because it is generally a practice of people from developed, rich nations travelling to provide assistance to people in developing, poor countries (Palacios, 2010). Therefore, through volunteer tourism, the rich people can share or transfer their wealth, skills and knowledge to the poor people.

At the present time, the research on the role of volunteer tourism in poverty alleviation is still limited, especially in Thailand where research on volunteer tourism is still in its infancy stage. Upon realizing the gap in the literature on volunteer tourism, this research study aimed to investigate how volunteer tourism can help alleviate poverty in Thailand with the hope that the findings could provide a valuable insight on this issue.

Research Methodology

This study employed an interpretive paradigm utilizing qualitative research. This approach was chosen because the primary aim of this research was to gain a rich and in-depth understanding of the role of volunteer tourism in poverty reduction.

This study gathered data from two main groups of respondents who were related to volunteer tourism: Western volunteer tourists and Thai local people in the communities where volunteer tourism opportunities were offered. Both groups of the respondents were selected by purposive sampling and snowball sampling. For the group of the Western volunteer tourists, the researchers selected the informants from the volunteer tourists who, at the time of conducting the research, were participating in a volunteer tourism activity in Thailand. They must be residents of European countries and other developed countries. For the group of local residents, the researcher collected the data from those who lived in a community where volunteer tourism activities were being offered. These people must be those who had regular interactions with Western volunteer tourists or involved in volunteer tourism activities. As a result, there were twelve volunteer tourists and fifteen local residents.

Data were collected via a combination of semi-structured interviews and participant observation. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes and was recorded with permission from the respondents. Collected data were later transcribed. To supplement the data gained from in-depth interviews, participant observation by the researcher was also conducted with the aim of triangulating the data and providing more complete findings. The researchers took note on the data she gained from the participant observation.

The interview transcriptions and the field notes taken by the researcher were analysed with thematic analysis. This data analysis technique is "a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). It consists of six main phases, namely: (i) familiarising oneself with the data; (ii) generating initial codes; (iii) searching for themes; (iv) reviewing themes; (v) defining and naming themes; and (vi) producing the report. This data analysis technique was chosen because of its accessibility and flexibility for qualitative data analysis. This technique is not attached to any particular theoretical or epistemological approaches, and so can be applied across different theoretical frameworks (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Research Findings

Data analysis shows that both Western volunteer tourists and Thai local residents thought that volunteer tourism has a high potential to be utilized as a pro-poor tourism strategy or a means to improve the lives of poor or unfortunate people in the country. Specifically, volunteer tourism enables these people to gain true benefits from tourism. In the opinion of both groups of the respondents, the main benefit of volunteer tourism was not only in the form of money or economic benefits, but also in the form of social benefits.

In terms of the economic benefits, it was found that volunteer tourism provided supplementary income, and employment opportunities to local people. They also help fortunate people by donating money and other necessary things. Local people were hired to work in the volunteer tourism projects. In the view of the volunteer tourists, they thought that donation was the easiest way to help the local communities. However, in the view of the local residents, money gained from the volunteer tourists was not a sustainable form of pro-poor tourism. In other words, they were aware that such money could not help them to enjoy long-term benefits because they could not always depend themselves on money received from the volunteer tourists.

In terms of the social benefits, both groups of the respondents similarly believed that knowledge given by the volunteer tourists to the local people was very significant and could help reduce poverty in long term. In the view of the local people, English knowledge was the most important knowledge that they could gain from the Western volunteer tourists. They thought that an ability to communicate in English is highly significant in Thailand and served as an effective way to be successful in one's future career which could reduce the problem of poverty in the community in long term. They believed that this form of benefit would be sustainable because with such knowledge, they did not always have to depend themselves on volunteer tourists. For the volunteer tourists, they thought that their skills, not only English skills, but also other skills, as well as time, and labor they sacrificed were worthwhile for the community because such things could help improve the condition of the community. The obvious examples included knowledge on other fields such as medical and public health knowledge, construction works, works related to natural environment conservation etc. These things could also serve as means to reduce poverty of local people in the communities.

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