

Research Probe

## Pro-poor Tourism: Is there Value beyond Whose Rhetoric?

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Regina Scheyvens' lead paper contains much of value, but there are problems with her critique of pro-poor tourism (PPT). The preamble, though, is acceptable: tourism obviously makes a major contribution to the economies of many less developed countries (LDCs), but this is the standard defence for most kinds of tourism. Equally evidently, the most strident advocates of tourism's poverty-alleviating qualities often come from (national and international) non-government organizations (NGOs), donors and aid agencies, though sometimes with academic support (Jamieson 2003). Noticeably, though, any necessary association of PPT with community-based tourism (CBT) has been specifically denied by PPT advocates, some of whom suggest that CBT is singularly unsuccessful in alleviating poverty (Goodwin 2006; Mitchell and Muckosy 2008).

The 'promise of PPT,' then, is something of a misnomer, and many of the ensuing criticisms are most appropriately directed at development organizations and self-interested industry players who might be described as PPT's fellow-travellers. In other respects, too, to take the 'harsh realities' in turn, the critique is flawed.

First, is *international tourism founded on inequalities?* Unfortunately, this writer is misquoted as supporting this assertion; instead, it was argued that wealth disparities in destination societies 'are often highlighted by international tourism' (Harrison 2001a: 252), which is very different. In fact, most international tourism is within developed areas, where resident and tourist are more or less of equal status. In LDCs, disparities in wealth are often more pronounced, but they invariably pre-existed tourism and (as in the Caribbean) enabled those with financial and cultural capital to advance the new industry (Harrison 2001b: 28-33). To deduce from this that there is somehow a *logical* connection between international tourism and wealth discrepancies in destination areas, and that international tourism is founded on inequalities, is inappropriate.

The more general (implied) argument is that any capitalist development which involves wealth discrepancies (and is there any other?) is unacceptable, and thus to take a

position which, as a former colleague noted long ago, effectively says 'that capitalism ought to be nice' (Smith 1983: 74). That it frequently is not is no argument against tourism *per se*, or any other driver of economic and social change.

Secondly, Scheyvens suggests that *the figures don't add up*, but to link leakages from tourism in LDCs with dependency on metropolitan countries is disingenuous. How could it be otherwise? It is eminently sensible to promote import substitution, but the 'harsh reality' is that small, resource-poor LDCs are unlikely to ever compete on equal terms with more developed manufacturing economies! Furthermore, leakage figures are notoriously misleading and unreliable. Much depends on the initial outlay (50% of US \$250 spent at the Sheraton or Inter-Continental is surely economically preferable to 90% of US \$20 at a cheap guest house), on how calculations are done, and on what is included and excluded. As Mitchell and Ashley (both involved in PPT projects) argue, ignoring out-of-pocket spending at destinations (which critics of high leakages often do) is simply unacceptable, as is considering expenditure made outside a destination, e.g., on marketing, packaging and flights, to be a 'leakage.' This, they say, is 'like suggesting that staff and accommodation costs for serving a cappuccino in a London café are 'leakage' from coffee plantations in Ethiopia!' (2007: 1).

We should indeed 'look very carefully at how the statistics are portrayed by PPT advocates' (*PAGE NUMBER (last sentence of the figures do not add up of lead text)*) and no less carefully at those used by their critics.

Thirdly, the accusation that PPT is a form of '*window dressing*' is common and not without substance (Mowforth and Munt 2003: 184-185). 'Greenwashing' has undoubtedly occurred; the involvement of tourism (and other) corporations in corporate social responsibility (CSR) has been exaggerated, and often prompted by self-interest. In general, too, much PPT has focused on 'minor reforms for a marketed tourism sector...' though this, surely, has some merit, and to assert it is (only?) 'to deflect criticisms and prevent unwelcome regulation' (see Higgins-Desbolles 2006 claim

on page of lead probe text) is an unwarranted demonization of all such programmes and their instigators.

Fourthly, Scheyvens asks: *Are small benefits sufficient and sustainable?* The implied response is that they are not, and then follow several quite separate simplistic criticisms, which have to be countered equally briefly:

As PPT is defined, wealthier factions in a destination might actually benefit more than the poor in a PPT programme. This, though, is fully accepted by PPT's founders!

The poor might be only passive participants. Such passivity is not advocated by PPT advocates, but arguably there is no *necessity* for them to participate at all levels in CBT (Tosun 2005; Simpson 2008).

PPT does not take account of environmental, social, or cultural impacts of growth-oriented strategies of tourism development. This is probably so, but the central concern of PPT practitioners is to incorporate the poor as far as possible in existing tourism markets.

In short, PPT advocates are accused of taking positions to which they freely admit, or of not focusing on priorities they have never defined!

Fifthly, *businesses are in existence to make profits, not to service the poor*. As the first priority of any business *has* to be survival, this is stating the obvious, and there is no *a priori* reason to attribute a greater (or *lesser*) commitment of tourism entrepreneurs to alleviate poverty than operators of other businesses. However, as Scheyvens notes, environmentally- or socially-friendly business practices make good business sense. Indeed, this is so *even if they are performed by people whose motives might be questionable* (an issue that merits wide debate). In the case of tourism, which is reliant on hospitality skills, there are strong pragmatic reasons for having destination residents on your side, and while corporate social responsibility (CSR) in tourism (as in other industries) may prompt only a small proportion of trans-national corporations (TNC) activities, communities in LDCs are also sometimes assisted by owners of resorts and other tourist establishments in ways that are frequently unpublicised. Undoubtedly more *could* be done, but it is unclear why tourist establishments, to an extent greater than any other kind of business, should be upbraided for their failure to do more.

Finally, to suggest that 'neoliberal logic....was behind the move to make poverty-alleviation the leading development agenda in the 1990s' is an unworthy attempt of Scheyvens to besmirch PPT by associating it with what (for *some*) is an unacceptable political and economic ideology.

There is no evidence PPT advocates were or are committed to neoliberalism (unless working with capitalists is an offence in itself, in which case most of us are guilty), or of widespread hostility to governments taking an enabling role in tourism development. Indeed, the literature on tourism development and planning commonly accords the state a key role (Hall 2005), and in many LDCs (including several in South-east Asia and China), the state *is* a major player (Wood 1997; Hall 2001). And the choice of SNV as an exemplar of neoliberal policy is especially strange, given its prominent role in assisting governments to intervene in tourism in such LDCs as Laos (Harrison and Schipani 2007).

Other references in this section of the probe are similarly open to question: that poverty alleviation is not simply a matter of meeting very basic needs is fully accepted by PPT proponents (Harrison 2008: 857), and labour exploitation in some tourism enterprises is not an indictment of all tourism (any more than noting unsafe working conditions in some coal mines necessitates closing all mines).

Scheyvens' critique of PPT, then, is problematic because it illogically and incorrectly identifies tourism with inequality, implicitly seeks a greater commitment to poverty-alleviation by tourism entrepreneurs than representatives of other industries, and continuously switches the critique from PPT's key writers to NGOs, aid agencies and other fellow travellers, and from tourism in general to smaller and more self-contained PPT projects.

This does not make PPT the greatest innovation since sliced bread. This writer agrees that PPT practitioners do not focus only on the poor, and has argued, at length (Harrison 2008), they have no distinct theory or methods, and have no necessary association with any one type of tourism. Lacking a distinctive approach to tourism as a development tool, they operate largely outside the academic community, usually in conjunction with aid donors and NGOs, but with the (necessary) support of a few highly capitalistic international tourism organizations in developing relatively small tourism projects. In essence, PPT is 'a stated concern with the poor - a moral injunction - [and] a movement, an incipient pressure group, which consistently runs the risk of being hijacked by those who seek to claim the high moral ground...and the more moral product' (Harrison 2008: 865).

Ultimately, though, PPT is a soft target, and most criticisms expressed in Scheyvens' research probe would be accepted by its key proponents and more appropriately directed at their followers. More positively, however, it is to the considerable credit of PPT practitioners that they have successfully redirected attention to the needs of the poor, a

central concern in early approaches to tourism and development (de Kadt 1979: xii) but one more recently neglected.

And then what? First, it is about time it was recognized that 'tourism' is an umbrella term for all kinds of related activities, carried out by individuals and collectivities. As a non-actor, 'it' does nothing, and to blame 'tourism' for 'causing' this or that impact is unproductive reification.

Secondly, although critics might deplore capitalism in all its forms and guises, it is a fact of life – a 'harsh reality' – that production for profit is the dominant *motif* of our age. So far, critics of modern tourism (sic) have not produced a feasible alternative; whether or not we advocate PPT, we all operate within the constraints of the system. Indeed, even

*Tourism Recreation Research* must at least break even!

Thirdly, in development studies generally, the role of the state has re-emerged as a central concern (Leftwich 2000; Lockwood 2003). As Lockwood indicates: 'Neither liberalization nor *dirigisme* is guaranteed to lead to industrialisation and sustainable economic growth – what counts is the quality of the intervention, and, therefore, the nature of the state' (2005: 3-4). More specifically, in a *developmental* state, tourism – *virtually any kind of tourism* – can be used to benefit the poor, but where governments are not actively committed to increasing the welfare of citizens, and are characterized instead by graft, greed and corruption, no tourism, whether or not under the PPT label, will be a successful tool for development.

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