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Original scientific paper

HARNESSING LOCAL WISDOM: A CORNERSTONE FOR RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

In recent decades, tourism has evolved into one of the largest, fastest-growing, and most dynamic industrial sectors, encompassing various complementary businesses across diverse fields. The pivotal role of local knowledge in shaping tourism services and products in rural areas cannot be overstated. This paper explores the central theme: "The Essential Role of Local Knowledge in Planning, Management, and Implementation of Tourism Processes for the Sustainable Development of the Maleshevo Region". Employing a qualitative approach with ethnography as the methodology, this research aims to underscore how the inhabitants of this region, owing to unique geographical circumstances and physical 'isolation' resulting from challenging transportation and communication channels, have cultivated an indigenous tradition and culture. This cultural heritage, largely preserved to this day, represents a valuable asset from a tourist perspective, offering a rich source for the creation of both existing and novel attractive tourist products and services. These, in turn, serve as the foundation and a unique opportunity for the continued sustainable growth of the area.

Keywords: tourism, local knowledge, rural area, sustainable growth

JEL classification: L83; Z32; I15; O18

INTRODUCTION

The primary objective of this paper is to delve into local knowledge within the context of the tourism industry, focusing on the following topics:

- Researching local knowledge and its application in rural tourism.
- Creating opportunities for sustainable growth and development of active tourism in rural areas using local knowledge.

The focal point of this research is the utilization of local knowledge, which holds immense potential for the growth and development of rural areas. Furthermore, it aims to present a model for effectively employing this knowledge to maximize its benefits in crafting an appealing active tourism offering. Tourists visit rural destinations to partake in tourist services and products deeply intertwined with local knowledge, as these services and products can only exist with the presence of this knowledge as a foundational source. The research encompasses three key terms requiring analysis:

- Local knowledge

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- Active Tourism
- Local knowledge in the service of sustainable growth and development of active tourism in rural areas

In the contemporary world, tourism stands as a prominent phenomenon, encompassing journeys for recreation, leisure, or business purposes. Defined by the World Tourism Organization, tourism involves activities conducted by individuals during their travel and stay outside their habitual environment, lasting no more than one calendar year, for vacation, business, or other non-employment-related reasons. However, a more nuanced approach emphasizes not only satisfying guests' needs but surpassing them (Coviello, Winklhofer, and Hamilton 2006). In the current dynamic and mobile lifestyle, people seek to continually discover and experience new and authentic elements (Singh, Saini, and Majumdar 2015). Given its integral connection to development, tourism serves as a catalyst for socio-economic progress, notably contributing to the income of many developing countries (UNWTO, 2020a).

Active tourism represents a travel philosophy intertwining various activities and experiences, merging adventure tourism, cultural tourism, gastronomic tourism, agritourism, ecotourism, educational tourism, among others. Tourists increasingly favor serene and pristine locations endowed with untouched nature (Çelik, 2016). Notably, well-managed active tourism minimizes negative impacts while strongly supporting the local community and sustainable destination development. Beyond economic objectives, sustainable tourism involves assessing environmental and social dimensions, with a focus on reducing, remediating, or improving negative impacts (Loaiza et al., 2019). Ultimately, sustainable tourism aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals agenda (SDGs) (UNWTO & UNDP, 2017). As critical stakeholders in tourist destinations, local communities play a pivotal role in supporting policies for sustainable tourism in collaboration with other stakeholders (Tokmak, 2019). The local community, with its material and spiritual culture, living traditions, production of ecological food, and the mountain environment, constitutes a substantial part of the active tourism offering. Rural restructuring, broadly defined by researchers, involves changes in the economy, governance, and political responsibility (Halseth, Markey, Reimer, & Manson, 2010).

Local knowledge, accumulated by a community over time, is often experiential, spanning centuries of use. Rooted in local culture, it adapts to the local ecosystem and environment. Leveraging local knowledge for planning, managing, and implementing tourism processes in the region is deemed of essential and crucial importance (Danièle Clavel, 2014).

1. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a case study methodology to explore how local knowledge impacts sustainable development in rural communities, particularly within active tourism destinations. Acknowledged for its depth in investigating complex phenomena (Stake, 2005), case studies allow for focused examination of a community, organization, or event within a specific context (Bryman, 2004). Qualitative case studies, proven effective in understanding the impacts of social and economic restructuring (Jackson et al., 2007; Oncescu & Giles, 2012, 2013), align with the research goal of uncovering the diverse impacts of rural community restructuring, especially in active tourism development. This methodological choice sets the stage for an in-depth exploration of the Maleshevia region, aiming to reveal how local knowledge shapes sustainable growth in active

tourism. The study combines qualitative methods with a case study framework to uncover challenges and innovative solutions in leveraging local knowledge for rural development, contributing practical insights to inform policies in these areas.

1.1. Study participants

To comprehend the influence of local knowledge on sustainable development in rural communities, especially within the realm of active tourism destinations, this study prioritized interviews with community leaders. This qualitative approach mirrors methodologies utilized in rural restructuring research, where local leaders were interviewed to support studies investigating the impact on rural community life (Oncescu and Giles 2012, 2013).

Data collection was meticulously conducted through structured interviews. The researcher collaborated closely with key community informants to identify suitable research participants. These informants were chosen for their knowledge essential to achieving the research study's goals and for aiding in the identification of community stakeholders for the structured interviews. This method exemplifies purposive sampling, ensuring representation not only from leaders but also from diverse life segments actively participating in community life.

2. LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Local knowledge encompasses the entire system of actions, concepts, beliefs, and perceptions held by a community about the world around them. Within the Maleshevo rural community, local knowledge contains a rich segment of traditional wisdom. Historically "isolated" from the rest of the world due to its mountainous environment, limited technological communication, and border location with Bulgaria, the region's unique circumstances fostered the development of an indigenous tradition and culture. This heritage, still predominantly intact, now represents a valuable asset from a tourist perspective, serving as the foundation for both existing and novel attractive tourist products and services.

Local knowledge, whether carried by individuals or the entire community, embodies the customs, practices, and dynamic relationships within the community. In Maleshevia, this local knowledge has significantly influenced the development of active tourism offerings. Crafted over two decades, the region's active tourism endeavors align entirely with the principles of sustainable development. The goal is to provide tourists with an active and memorable experience, all while prioritizing care for the natural environment and benefiting the local community.

The Maleshevo region boasts an array of active tourism activities, including hiking, mountain biking, agrotourism, visits to traditional craft workshops, monasteries, museums, local food producers, folklore and music performances, bicycle rentals, organized group cooking, and nature picnics. These activities, often combined in comprehensive programs led by tourism professionals, guides, and local enthusiasts, contribute to the region's flourishing reputation in the realm of sustainable and enriching tourism.

2.1. Local Knowledge as Generator for Tourism needs

Differences in social status can affect the perception of knowledge, the access to knowledge, and crucially, the importance and credibility of one's knowledge. Often, the knowledge possessed by the poor, young people and women is overlooked and ignored, but in Maleshevo community, from the point of view of creating a tourist offer, it is they who stand out as very significant. I will highlight them:

- Agricultural and Animal Husbandry Knowledge: essential for the region's tourism, particularly in providing quality products (Lillywhite & Simonsen, 2014; Karamustafa & Ülker, 2020)
- Harvesting Expertise: the knowledge related to the collection of forest fruits, mushrooms, various medical and spicy herbs, wild gooseberries, blackberries, strawberries and raspberries, which are of great importance in Maleshevo gastronomy and living customs (Bianchi, 2017);
- Traditional Crafts: the knowledge related to traditional crafts whose products today still find a utilitarian place in people's everyday life, but also as part of the tourist chain, as ethno characteristic useful products, souvenirs and decorations;
- Culinary Artisans and woman touch: experts in preparing traditional delicacies, a standout feature of Maleshevo's tourist offerings.
- Youth Involvement: particularly engaged in exploring the mountains for recreation, hiking, mountain biking, and serving as active tourist guides..
- Forest Fund Utilization: the category of people dealing with the use of the forest fund are excellent mountain connoisseurs and their knowledge is of great benefit in creating mountain trails for adventure tourism.

In Maleshevo, these diverse contributors collectively shape the foundation of a rich and authentic tourist experience, emphasizing the significance of inclusive knowledge in crafting a sustainable and vibrant tourism sector. From this perspective, the importance and essentiality of these categories of people and their knowledge for the development of active tourism and the overall progress of Maleshevo region become evident. Local knowledge, unique to each community, significantly influences the development of various tourist products, evolving into unique selling advantages for the destination (Gündüz, 2017).

Local knowledge is actually serious part of human capital. In reality, it is the human struggle for survival and a better life, the production of food, the provision of living conditions and the achievement of control over one's own life for a surviving or constant living progress. It is hereditary, passed down from generation to generation and closely intertwined with the cultural values of the local community. It encompasses the skills, experiences and insights of people, applied to sustain and/or improve their livelihoods.

Knowledge is essential for the sustainable development of the region, as well as for the maintenance, creation, care of human capital, but also a possibility for creation available financial opportunities. The core component of any country's knowledge system is, its local knowledge.

While local knowledge in Maleshevo is rooted in tradition, there is a concern about the risks it faces today. Nowadays, due to general global communication, which is also present in Maleshevo society, knowledge systems are dynamic, people are susceptible to adapting to changes in their environment and receive ideas from different sources. Despite the above, knowledge and access to it, is not equal for all individuals in the community. People have different goals, interests, perceptions, beliefs and access to information, knowledge and resources, some are more open, some are more progressive,

some are even self-initiated and innovative, while others are totally closed. The penetration of new modern knowledge and new technologies, in the global time of living, are incredibly fast and the changes they cause could be and are very influential, in all spheres of local life. Most often they are equated with progress, but in this case of creating local development through the prism of active tourism, if it is not done in a systematic way, to a greater extent they represent a threat of disruption, loss, disappearance of all the potential, provided by local knowledge and practice. In the process of introduction of new knowledge into the local community, for first always it must to be consider, the existing local knowledge and to be looked for forms of help and types of progress within them, because the local ecosystem must not be changed, but only to help it in better practice.

3. KNOWLEDGE THAT IS PRESENT IN THE REGION AND WHICH CAN BE USED FOR THE SELF-REPRODUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Establishing a system to preserve, protect, and encourage the ongoing practice of local knowledge is imperative to prevent its disappearance and the replacement of traditional practices in Maleshevo. Particular attention should be directed towards safeguarding local knowledge and traditional practices in the following areas:

Agriculture: preservation of indigenous crops such as potatoes, plums..., the selection of crops that have traditionally been cultivated here and the practices surrounding it, as well as knowledge of soil fertility management (Dedeoğlu et al. 2022);

- Animal husbandry: emphasis on the traditional sheep farming that is symbolic to the region, leading to unique local products like: the Berovo cheese, the spicy pepper sheep cheese, the bulamac, the sale of lambs... other specific dairy product is the unique zhezhen cheese made from cow milk, but there are also the other small and large livestock, which for centuries back are a part of the life of the locals, between which is the indigenous pig which is disappearing... and of course the ways in which, it was traditionally carried out: the treatment of livestock - mostly with herbs, its feeding, reproduction...;
- Use and management of natural resources: wild species resources such as medicinal herbs, tea and spice herbs; wild berries, gooseberries, strawberries, raspberries and blackberries, blackthorn, wild apples, plums and pears; the mushrooms and fungi that abound in the mountain are of exceptional high quality, such as boletus, chanterelle mushroom, parasol mushroom...; animals: rabbit, fox, wolf, wild boar...; the fish stock of the rivers and the lake...;
- Traditional trades: blacksmithing, weaving, copper-smelting, tin-smithing, barrel making, millinery, wicker baskets...;
- Folklore: dances and costumes, songs, locally represented instruments and music, legends, narrated history, customs, traditional recipes, handicrafts such as spinning wool, tapestries, knitted things, embroidered things..., traditional events, celebrations, carnival and everything that encompasses the local culture;
- Farm-huts - frequent households, kind of small farms, which are scattered throughout the mountains, which have a particularly significant place in the chain of tourist offer for active tourism.

The above, as stated, is of great importance as a resource for the use and creation of a tourist product, service and offer, and represents part of the key very unique competitive differences and advantages of the region, which can be use for its strength, possibility and diversification from all other on the touristic market. Therefore, a system must be established for the protection, preservation, and stimulation of progress, ensuring sustainable use and management.

While embracing new technologies, including digitalization, is essential for development processes, it is crucial to avoid neglecting local knowledge, experiences, and practices. A balanced approach must acknowledge the inherent value of traditional wisdom in the overall development and sustainability of the region.

4. METHODS OF SYSTEMATIC ORGANIZATION OF SELF-REPRODUCTION OF LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND EXTERNAL SUPPORT

To address the preservation, protection, and advancement of local knowledge, a comprehensive system needs to be established. Creating awareness of the existence and significance of local knowledge is crucial within the local community, involving residents, businesses, the civil sector, and local government. However, it should not be expected that this is enough to deal with modern challenges, both of community livelihood and of tourism processes. Thus, local knowledge should be a component of a more complex system that will contain the specified characteristics for its protection, preservation and stimulation towards progress, but which will also contain innovative new ways and technologies, which will help and support local development processes.

In the formation of this complex system, key stakeholders, including bearers of local knowledge, the tourism-hospitality business community, the civil sector, and the local government, should collaborate within a partnership body. This body, responsible for creating conditions for a better life in the region, needs to involve representatives from diverse sectors to ensure a holistic approach (Rasul et al., 2019). Additionally, competent and experienced external collaborators should be engaged to address specific issues and challenges, bringing valuable insights and success stories from similar contexts, both nationally and internationally. The competence of the internal and external collaborators in the process is paramount, because otherwise they can create an imbalance, in stimulating certain segments and neglecting others, by prototyping and putting into practice official rules, and perhaps neglecting informal norms, in which process the local partnership body will have very strong position and influence. In this way, the direct involvement of the participants representing a variety of sectors in the community in the creation of the new complex system will be ensured, which will on the other hand contribute to a sense of ownership, which in turn will cause awareness and care, responsibility towards the development processes, i.e. a positive outcome from them, including the creation of: an increase in household income, new business opportunities, promotion of entrepreneurship, forms of superstructure and infrastructure and environmental protection, shortly said sustainable growth will be enabled or with other words provision and care of the social, econmic and enviromental development. All this will result in a strong "welcoming, receptive and hospitable" relationship will be built from the whole community towards the present tourists, which will leave an

extraordinary impression on the guests and the whole created situation will further influence with a "snowball" effect in the development of the destination, but primarily in a better life for the local population.

5. CHARACTERISTICS OF MALESHEVO DESTINATION

5.1. Tourist offer of Maleshevo destination

Maleshevo destination is characterized by a range of features designed to enhance the visitor experience:

- **Infrastructure:** ensuring well-maintained roads, communication networks, efficient transport, reliable energy supply, sewage systems, waste management, water access, and essential services such as schools, healthcare, and police facilities.
- **Idyllic Natural Setting:** nestled in a picturesque mountainous ecological environment, Maleshevo boasts a captivating natural landscape that serves as a primary attraction.
- **Tourism Superstructure:** diverse accommodation, additional facilities, restaurants, coffee bars, some parking lots, rest areas, and parks.
- **Local Attractions:** a rich array of local attractions, including guided tours, cultural events, traditional customs, noteworthy landmarks, mountain trails, mountain guides, traditional crafts and folklore, monasteries, and mountain bike rentals.
- **Producers of Healthy Food:** Maleshevo stands out for its local producers dedicated to healthy food practices, encompassing animal husbandry, agriculture, honey production, forest fruit gathering, and an enticing agritourism offer. The region hosts mountain farms-traditional "huts," contributing to a sustainable and authentic culinary experience (Sharma et al., 2014; Sims, 2010; Murphy & Smith, 2009);.

This comprehensive tourist offer positions Maleshevo as a destination with a harmonious blend of natural beauty, well-developed infrastructure, cultural richness, and a high potential for further growth and sustainable development.

5.2. Integrated Tourist Offer Knowledge System

Maleshevo destination features a streamlined knowledge system that integrates:

- **Local Tradition:** tapping into the rich local and traditional wisdom.
- **Business Insight:** utilizing expertise from tourism and hospitality businesses.
- **Service Understanding:** a comprehensive grasp of tourist services, attractions, and events.
- **Efficient Collaboration:** fostering seamless collaboration and communication among stakeholders.

While the existing knowledge system successfully blends local heritage with industry expertise, there is ample room for further enhancement.

5.3. Essential Elements for Tourist Offer Management:

Imperative for effective tourist offer management:

- Continuous Enhancement: ensure constant care, improvement, growth, innovation, and quality of existing tourist products, services, and offerings.
- Timely Information: Provide permanent and accurate current information about the entire destination within the destination itself.
- Comprehensive Destination Knowledge: Possess excellent knowledge of the destination and its offerings to conduct PR, marketing, promote local tourism products and services in suitable markets to maximize visibility and sales activities effectively.

CONCLUSION

The meticulous planning of sustainable rural tourism, rooted in local knowledge, unfolds through a series of strategic stages. These include a thorough analysis of the current local tourism landscape, an evaluation of its regional positioning within the broader context, the establishment of effective legal frameworks by local and central authorities, and the formulation of a robust development strategy and actionable plan.

The pursuit of active tourism within Maleshevo local communities emerges as a pivotal strategy for fostering local sustainable development. This approach offers multifaceted solutions to economic, social, and environmental challenges, underlining its significance in addressing the unique needs of the region.

As we delve into the application of planning principles within the realm of active tourism, certain crucial aspects come to the forefront. A burgeoning emphasis on a formal planning system becomes apparent, one that places significant importance on unlocking the potential benefits of active tourism development. Overcoming physical and practical obstacles is imperative to realizing the full potential of these activities, encompassing trail maintenance, creation of recreational spaces, and infrastructure development. Collaborative efforts involving local authorities, civic society organizations, and the business sector, supported by external entities such as donors - foreign development agencies, play a pivotal role in ensuring the success and sustainability of these initiatives. Moreover, the participatory role of the local community in the planning and management of active tourism emerges as an indispensable factor. This active involvement fosters a delicate balance between development and sustainable planning, ensuring the preservation of the natural environment and integrating active tourism with broader economic and social development. Recognizing the importance of local knowledge, skills, and practices, coupled with the necessity for mentoring, training, and guidance, becomes paramount for the effective implementation of these initiatives.

Simultaneously, planning at the local government level, with strong community influence, is vital. This includes active engagement from businesses within the tourism sector. The full participation of local communities becomes the linchpin for a development policy that charts a sustainable future. Although challenging, the inclusion of local communities in the planning and management processes is crucial, as it prevents the inherent unsustainability that arises from neglecting environmental, economic, or socio-cultural considerations.

In addressing the development of active tourism within the principles of sustainable development, several key considerations come to light. There is a pressing need to embed sustainability principles and adapt local knowledge at all organizational levels, spanning from the grassroots community to local businesses and government bodies. The effectiveness of this knowledge transfer hinges on the participants and the network established for this purpose. A well-structured network, with principles and tools, becomes the driving force behind the effective implementation of sustainable practices, fostering cooperation, and knowledge management within the destination.

The three dimensions of sustainable development – ecological, socio-cultural, and economic – stand as pillars for overall well-being in the destination. They address personal health, environmental sustainability, social well-being, economic activities, and the creation of high-quality tourism experiences. Sustainable development allows for the integrated management of resources, ensuring that economic, social, and aesthetic needs are met while preserving basic ecological processes and biological diversity.

Local and central governments bear significant responsibilities for implementing sustainability principles in local destinations, covering policy development, regulatory frameworks, research, analysis, and strategic planning. Examples include the creation of green eco-regions, investment in local infrastructure, and the utilization of tourist tax funds for sustainable practices.

Given the economic challenges in the Maleshevo region, where the unemployment rate is very high, the development of active tourism takes on heightened importance. This development stimulates economic growth, preserves traditional and cultural heritage, safeguards the mountain environment, encourages service businesses, and raises living standards. Notably, it provides strong opportunities for the engagement of women, young people, and vulnerable groups, fostering positive practices within the community and enhancing the overall tourism offering.

However, as the Maleshevo rural active tourism destination evolves, concerns regarding protection from overcrowding become imminent. A careful analysis-study on the destination's capacity and tourism planning is essential to manage tourist influx, additional consumption, traffic, waste, and potential negative impacts on natural and historical sites. A proactive approach is critical to prevent overfilling, degradation, and adverse effects on the local environment and population, thus ensuring sustainable development. Tourism capacity and planning remain pivotal for sustainable tourism markets, demanding a nuanced approach to address the potential impacts of active tourism on the destination.

In essence, active tourism presents an opportunity for the sustainable development of the Maleshevo region. While the benefits are substantial, careful consideration, planning, and collaboration are imperative to navigate the challenges associated with tourism growth and to safeguard the fragile balance between development and sustainability.

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