



Digital Communication and Tourism for Development

Alessandro Inversini and Isabella Rega

Contents

Introduction: Tourism and Developing Countries	2
The Conceptualization of eTourism 4 Development	3
Community-Based Tourism: The Context of Action	6
Digital Communication Technologies in Community-Based Tourism: Experts' Opinion	7
Discussion and Conclusions	8
References	10

Abstract

This book chapter aims to discuss critically the role of digital communication technologies in tourism for development. In doing so, the literature at the intersection of tourism, development studies, and digital communication technologies is presented, with a clear proposal to overcome the current reductionist approach within the field. The chapter presents a holistic model of the role of digital communication technologies in tourism for development, which sees them not only as a tool (i.e., to market the destination) but also as a catalyst and a driver for experience creation and co-creation.

Keywords

Tourism · Development studies · eTourism 4 Development

A. Inversini (✉)

Henley Business School, University of Reading, Greenlands Henley-on-Thames, UK

e-mail: a.inversini@henley.ac.uk

I. Rega (✉)

Centre of Excellence in Media Practice, Faculty of Media and Communication,

Bournemouth University, Bournemouth, UK

e-mail: irega@bournemouth.ac.uk

© Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd. 2018

J. Servaes (ed.), *Handbook of Communication for Development and Social Change*,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-7035-8_82-1

Introduction: Tourism and Developing Countries

The nature of the contribution of tourism to developing and emerging economies is to date controversial. Both researchers and practitioners have been discussing this subject, debating a series of issues that can be positioned on a spectrum with two clear ends: on the one side, there is the technical and infrastructural development of the destination; on the other side, there is the social development of the communities involved in the tourism initiatives.

Commentators praise the advent of tourism in developing rural contexts endowed by natural beauties: this, in fact, helps the creation of infrastructures and services that are used primarily by the travelers and ultimately by the residents. Apart from infrastructural and eventual economic gains, other benefits attributed to tourism in developing and rural areas include skills development; exposure to the world beyond their immediate locality; better access to education, healthcare, clean water, and transportation; and increased confidence in and sense of ownership of the enterprise and the neighborhood in which the tourism enterprise is situated (Scheyvens 2007). Historically, the growth of tourism destinations in developing countries has been led by private companies, often in conjunction with governments and local authorities; these created the basis for tourism to flourish in the designated area. Governments around the world have started to encourage initiatives for the requalification of rural and developing areas (e.g., Park and Yoon 2009) with specific funding programs. These programs are frequently aimed at transforming the primary source of income for local communities (which are often based on agriculture and breeding) and thereby fostering the culture of tourism and hospitality.

Most of these programs have proved to be successful, often radically transforming and reshaping the landscape and the value chain of the rural/developing areas. However, one of the main challenges of these approaches (both the private and public funding programs) lies in the sustainability of the interventions: community dwellers need to be part of the transformation process; otherwise, as soon as the public funding runs out and/or the destination is considered fully exploited by the private sector, they would not have any ownership of the tourism initiatives, and the community would collapse. Academic literature has often advocated the inclusion and involvement of local communities as they are seen as a key resource for sustainable tourism development. In fact, tourism can facilitate community development and poverty eradication because it is labor-intensive, inclusive of women and the informal sector, and often based on the natural and cultural heritage of the rural communities (Ashley and Roe 2002). However, in this respect, there is the clear possibility of the exploitation of local natural and human resources by international investors (Deller 2010): there is the risk of nurturing the creation of a local working class of poor for the international riches. This attitude clearly reflects a kind of post-colonialist approach to tourism where rich investors are able to drive the change within the destination without really involving the local communities in the process. It is clear that, if there is no feeling of ownership of the tourism projects and of the destination, communities will inevitably breakdown. However, there is also evidence of communities successfully blending the traditional source of income

(e.g., farming) with hospitality and tourism practices (funded either by the public or private sponsor); these lucky communities flourished to a new life, and community dwellers are actually the protagonists, and ultimately the added value, of the tourism experience (Park and Yoon 2009).

Additionally, UNWTO – United Nations World Tourism Organization – proclaimed 2017 the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development (UNTWO 2017), effectively endorsing the impact of tourism on local socioeconomic development. However, both within the UNTWO documents and in the general academic literature about tourism in developing and emerging economies, there is scant evidence about the role that digital communication technologies could play to facilitate and promote community-based sustainable tourism initiatives, thus underestimating how these technologies changed the global tourism market, which is increasingly relying on the internet for travel search and purchase (Spencer et al. 2012).

The Conceptualization of eTourism 4 Development

The research community is starting to acknowledge the importance of digital communication technologies in tourism for development (e.g., Gössling 2017); however, there remains a long way to go to understand fully the impact of digital communication technologies in this field and their possible evolution. In fact it is recognized that digital communication technologies have reshaped the competitive landscape of tourism (Buhalis 2003) on the one side and that on the other, they can strongly support community-based socioeconomic development (Unwin 2009). Nonetheless, there are few studies investigating the strategic and tactical role of digital communication technologies in community-based tourism for socioeconomic development (Rega and Inversini 2016).

This lack in the literature is peculiar, given (i) the possible contribution that tourism can bring to community development, (ii) the transformation that global tourism has faced in recent decades, and (iii) the recognition of the role played by digital communication technologies in the socioeconomic development processes. Let us first explore the interplay between tourism and community development. The industry is populated and operated by a galaxy of (micro) small and medium tourism enterprises (SMTEs), constituting its “life blood” (Thomas et al. 2011). These businesses operate in synergy with one another and dominate the value chain of the travel and tourism domain. In fact, to deliver a given experience (i.e., a hospitality experience), a series of competencies, products, and services (e.g., taxi service, breakfast, laundry service, etc.) needs to be provided, in addition to accommodation, by a succession of actors within the value chain. It is easy to understand that a popular and successful hospitality establishment in a community can have a waterfall impact on a series of other formal or informal players who provide services to the main business (i.e., hospitality). This is something that academic literature has already acknowledged and studied: Kirsten and Rogerson (2002), for example, focused their study on the contribution of micro and small tourism enterprises

(MSTEs) to the tourism value chain in emerging and developing economies; it transpires that successful interplay between SMTEs and MSTEs may result in a virtuous effect leading to local socioeconomic development for the local communities and for the overall tourism supply chain (Simpson 2008). However, also within these studies, there is no trace of the role of digital communication technologies, and the issue remains scantily investigated.

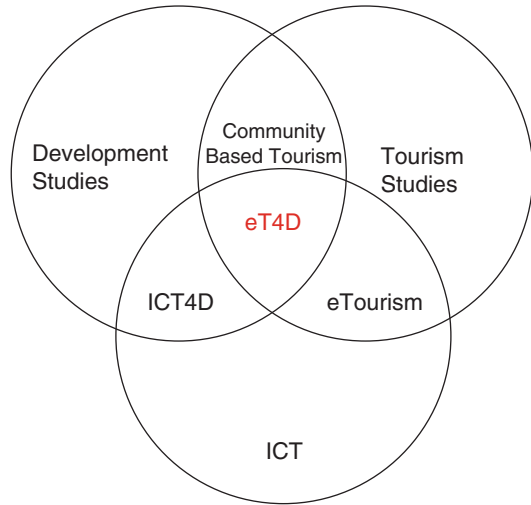
Let us now take into consideration how digital communication technologies have impacted the tourism industry. Recent decades have witnessed the disruptive rise of information and communication technologies (ICTs), which are playing a pivotal role in travel and tourism and are reshaping the competitive landscape of the industry. Literature acknowledges the impact of ICTs, especially the internet, in the tourism field within a stream of research called eTourism (Buhalis 2003). One of the most interesting issues in the recent development of communication technologies is related to their increasing availability (Rega and Inversini 2016). The rise of smartphones together with the mobile internet is allowing a wider audience to be online and to create and share contents in an extremely quick way. Mobile computing, alongside the unprecedented digitalization of conversations and word-of-mouth, creates an avenue for interactive discussion between communities of interests that were – until few years ago – separate from one another. Thanks to the advancements of technologies, peripheral tourism businesses – that are not included in the popular distribution channels – can now be visible and bookable by travelers.

Finally, let us consider how academics and practitioners have reflected and explored the crucial role of communication technologies to reach the Millennium Development Goals. In recent decades, a new interdisciplinary field of research has emerged, called ICT4D (Information and Communication for Development – Unwin 2009). ICT4D brings together computer scientists and social scientists tackling a broad range of developmental domain, such as agriculture, health, education, and political participation. Although there are a lack of studies focusing on tourism, an interesting set of works focuses on entrepreneurship and suggests micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises as units of analysis (Heeks 2010) to investigate the connection between technologies and development. An effective use of ICTs by SMTEs and MSTEs in developing contexts can enhance businesses' visibility and competitiveness and, therefore, improve the socioeconomic conditions of local communities.

We named the missing piece of research at the intersection between (i) development studies, (ii) tourism studies, and (iii) ICTs eT4D (eTourism 4 Development) (Fig. 1). In order to describe eT4D better, the following diagram will sum up the abovementioned intersections:

Tourism Studies and Development Studies: Literature presents an ever-growing body of research about the intersection between development studies and tourism studies (Sharpley and Telfer 2014). The academic debate acknowledges that there could be the risk of an imperialistic and post-colonialist approach of international tourism as outlined above. Exploitative tourism has been historically challenged (Krippendorff 2010), and alternative forms of tourism arose with

Fig. 1 The conceptualization of eTourism 4 Development



a renewed focus on local sustainability and community development. Alternative tourism is an ideologically different form of tourism that is considered preferable to mass, consumer-driven, and exploitative travel (Wearing 2001), because it takes into consideration the local communities and the local environment.

Tourism studies and ICT: ICTs have revolutionized the structure and organization of the tourism industry; the advent of the internet produced a paradigm shift in the industry thanks to the convergence among informatics, communication, and multimedia; technologies can support both (i) marketing, i.e., bringing to the attention of the travelers a given offer (Inversini et al. 2015), and (ii) the travel and tourism value chain, i.e., enabling the effective management of products and services (Zhang et al. 2009).

Development and ICT: Within the ICT4D field, ICTs are seen to generate benefits related, for example, to the interaction between customers and suppliers (Donner and Escobari 2010) or the enhancement of labor productivity leading to higher salaries; however, tourism has not been regarded as a research domain by academics and practitioners in the field (Rega and Inversini 2016) resulting in a low number of studies dealing with this issue.

Therefore, merging these three perspectives, tourism can contribute in disrupting its imperialistic and post-colonialist tradition in developing countries (Nash 1989; Pastran 2014) by giving access via the global market to alternative forms of tourism; thanks to digital communication technologies, communities and local players have the unprecedented opportunity to manage their experiential products by themselves and to promote and sell their products online without intermediaries. This can foster the growth of community-based tourism initiatives and enhance the economic and social status of local entrepreneurs and collaborators, thus generating better living conditions in disadvantaged communities.

Community-Based Tourism: The Context of Action

The concept of eTourism 4 Development can be applied to tourism and hospitality initiatives led by local communities (Inversini and Rega, 2016). It is in fact proposed that communities can leverage digital communication technologies to design, deliver, and promote their travel-related products and/or experiences to a wider public (e.g., Inversini et al. 2015). This vision challenges those of Cater (1995) and of Akama (1999) who were describing an oligopolistic scenario in developing and emerging economies dominated by big tour operators and travel agencies with high marketing power. What eTourism for Development proposes is to refocus the location of sustainability within the community, where local dwellers can engage among themselves and with international travelers, thanks to digital communication technologies, and in doing so disrupt the relationship with travel agents and tour operators. In this vision, digital communication technologies are seen as a strategy and tactic to foster both connections between local businesses and between local businesses and travelers.

This approach is facilitating the rise of alternative markets, which include sustainable tourism (Hunter 1997), ecotourism (Cater 1993), ethical tourism (Weeden 2002), and volunteer tourism (Uriely et al. 2003). These alternative forms of tourism are driven by a growing demand for products and services that are more sustainable, pro-poor, and less harmful to local environments and communities (Callanan and Thomas 2005). Community participation is often regarded as one of the most essential tools to drive tourism toward a substantial contribution to the local, regional, and national development of a country. When the community participates fully in tourism activities, there is sustainability, the increased opportunity for local people to benefit from the activity taking place in their vicinity, positive local attitudes, and the conservation of local resources (e.g., Tosun 2006). Murphy (1985) maintained that community-based tourism (CBT) emphasizes the inclusive participation of communities in tourism initiatives to ensure economic returns to the locals and promote the socioeconomic evolution of rural and developing areas (Heeks 2010).

On the same subject, Akama and Kieti (2007) stated that the success of tourism should not merely be measured in terms of the increase in arrivals and revenues but based also on how tourism is integrated with the local and national economies and its contribution to the overall development of the local communities. A bottom-up CBT initiative can induce development for the community, because local spontaneous participation would come with full involvement in production, management and marketing, product development in line with local assets, and reliance on community networks (Zhao and Ritchie 2007). In fact, the key to enhancing the welfare of poor communities is not in expanding the size of the tourism sector but in unlocking opportunities for the poor within the industry (Ashley and Roe 2002). In this way, tourism can be understood as one of many development strategies and could create synergies with other approaches to enhance community development and poverty alleviation (Zhao and Ritchie 2007).

Digital Communication Technologies in Community-Based Tourism: Experts' Opinion

In order to contribute to the discussion related to tourism in developing and emerging economies with the angle of community-based eTourism⁴ Development, this chapter presents the outcomes of 11 semi-structured interviews which will help in shedding light on the power of digital communication technologies in designing, supporting, and promoting tourism for development at the local level. This chapter presents experts' perspectives and proposes a framework for the adoption of digital communication technologies that would contribute toward the development of a new and transformative learning experience. In particular, the study wanted to understand experts' perspectives about (i) the importance and role of digital technologies in community-based tourism socioeconomic development and (ii) how digital technologies can serve community-based tourism.

Eleven international academic experts working at the crossroads of digital technology, tourism studies, and development studies were interviewed over the telephone. Experts were chosen on the basis of a systematic literature review for the structured keywords "tourism + digital technologies + local development" carried out in two academic databases, namely, EBSCO and Web of Science. Specifically, five of the interviewees had a background and a position related to tourism (marketing and management); five held a position related to development studies, and one had a position related to tourism and development studies. Respondents were asked about the importance and role of digital communication in community-based tourism socioeconomic development. Interviews were recorded, anonymized, and transcribed to be analyzed through thematic analysis.

Code	Role	Area of research
#1	Professor	Tourism
#2	Emeritus Professor	Developmental studies
#3	Senior Lecturer	Tourism and developmental studies
#4	Professor	Developmental studies
#5	Associate Professor	Developmental studies
#6	Professor	Tourism
#7	Professor	Tourism
#8	Professor	Tourism
#9	Assistant Professor	Tourism
#10	Associate Professor	Developmental studies
#11	Professor	Developmental studies

In the first instance, experts were all supporting the role of tourism for local socioeconomic development together with a series of possible controversial effects, thus confirming literature in the field (Deller 2010).

Engagement with people and developing them personally was one theme stressed by experts: the connection with local communities can hold great importance in motivating them to partake in the tourism development process. Expert #11 said that: "socio development has to do with people looking into themselves in terms of their

capability and so on, the financial uplifting of those people. I do think that tourism can serve as a very good tool to foster socio-economic development in local communities.”

However, expert #9 said with reference to African tourism that: “some of the local communities in the vicinity of tourism development have resentment towards it as they don’t see the benefits of it for them. They might see it as something that only recent people can engage in and as a community they won’t have access to it.” The issue of helping communities to understand tourism appears to be a hard balance to reach as some projects do not deliver the intended benefits. Expert #6 touched on this, stating: “The return investment just isn’t there; there’s a lot of evidence on evaluations on why tourism funded projects succeed or fail. When those have happened, the focus has been on looking at the output of the project, not the impacts developed by them.”

It is possible that there needs to be a shift in perceptions that moves past a focus on investment and toward assisting communities on a personal level. This is in line with the work of Kleine and Unwin (2009), where the accent is on the development of people’s freedom within communities rather than on infrastructural advancement.

The role of digital communication technologies within community-based tourism socioeconomic development was then discussed by interviewees. With mention of the islands in Greece, expert #5 emphasized that “The ICT applications have the ability to redefine distance between places; this impacts the attractiveness of a region for businesses, residences and education.” In this way technology is a driving force for development, in that it creates opportunities for communities to be able to make use of it (Inversini et al. 2015). Some experts (e.g., respondent #6) made mention of projects that have failed because of investments not being put to use effectively, and this lack of technological infrastructure in turn restricts the impact that technology can have on a region; expert #9 agreed with this: “I think unfortunately there cannot be socio-economic development without technology but I think in terms of developing countries the problem lies in wasted resources. We might have an idea that technology can make us more complex and efficient but if this is not available then we are stuck. The solution is to find some funding and the drive to focus on that will be most important.”

Ultimately communication technologies and tourism can play a critical role in socioeconomic development, but how they are both delivered and implemented is the most important factor. Experts mentioned specific techniques for this operation. For example, expert #1 mentioned the rise of smart tourism, a concept that “enables the collective competitiveness of tourism destination to manage their co-creation of activities.”

Discussion and Conclusions

When asked about the impact of digital communication technologies for community-based tourism socioeconomic development, two primary perspectives emerged:

- (i) Few experts believed that technology is just one of the possible tools to market and manage tourism at community level but that country/state policies and incentives are the (top-down) driving force for local socioeconomic development; expert #8 stated: “Technology is always only a tool; in order to empower someone, you need to understand the technology, so you need to understand the benefits, operate and handle it and also need a lot of time. If they are used to the proper way then that can empower people but on the other hand it can often be time-consuming and often (especially for smaller communities) it’s better for people to communicate face-to-face instead of using ICT.”
- (ii) Most of the experts discussed innovation (and in particular digital technology innovation) as the prerequisite for local socioeconomic development, claiming a bottom-up vision where community digital empowerment can nurture local socioeconomic development; expert #7 maintained: “Technology is a driving force for local growth and co-operation between different stakeholders at local level. It contributes to overcome physical, social and economic barriers.” On the same line of thought, respondent #1 explained: “Technology will provide the infrastructure for the development; interconnectivity will enable communities to put forward their story and attract customers. Technology will be the connector between buyer and seller and will provide the infrastructure to facilitate the co-creation of local experiences.”

Taking for granted the infrastructural evolution which is happening in some developing contexts, as asserted by experts (#1, #3, #7, #9, #10), it is possible to overcome the reductionist conception of digital communication technologies as a mere tool within this context to explore a more contemporary role of these as a catalyst for creating and co-creating experiences. Digital communication technologies should be leveraged to empower local communities to create a network of formal and informal business able to cooperate toward the creation and co-creation of sustainable travel experiences; this will allow communities to flourish and to leverage their identity toward the creation of authentic tourism products to be marketed to travelers. The marketing perspective (together with the sales one – eCommerce) is also essential to sustainable community-based tourism; digital communication technologies will, in fact, allow interactive communication between community dwellers and potential visitors toward the co-creation of experiences.

In conclusion, thanks to a detailed discussion of the role of tourism in socioeconomic development coupled with a critical debate on the academic literature about the key role of digital communication technologies in this field, this chapter proposed a new lens with which to study and understand the impact of digital communication technologies in socioeconomic development at the community-based tourism level; the chapter contributes to the body of knowledge of eTourism 4 Development, proposing a pragmatic and conceptual contribution about digital communication technologies to tourism for development.

References

- Akama JS (1999) The evolution of tourism in Kenya. *J Sustain Tour* 7(1):6–25
- Akama JS, Kieti D (2007) Tourism and socio-economic development in developing countries: a case study of Mombasa Resort in Kenya. *J Sustain Tour* 15:735–748. <https://doi.org/10.2167/jost543.0>
- Ashley C, Roe D (2002) Making tourism work for the poor: strategies and challenges in southern Africa. *Dev South Afr* 19(1):61–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0376835022012385>
- Buhalis D (2003) *E-Tourism: information technology for strategic tourism management*. Financial Times Prentice Hall, Harlow
- Callanan M, Thomas S (2005) Volunteer tourism: deconstructing volunteer activities within a dynamic environment. In: *Niche tourism: contemporary issues, trends and cases*. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford, pp 183–200
- Cater E (1993) Ecotourism in the third world: problems for sustainable tourism development. *Tour Manag* 14(2):85–90. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-5177\(93\)90040-R](https://doi.org/10.1016/0261-5177(93)90040-R)
- Cater E (1995) Consuming spaces: global tourism. In Allen J, Hammett C (eds) *A Shrinking World? Global Unevenness and Inequality* (Milton Keynes). Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp 183–231
- Deller S (2010) Rural poverty, tourism and spatial heterogeneity. *Ann Tour Res* 37(1):180–205. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.09.001>
- Donner J, Escobari MX (2010) A review of evidence on mobile use by micro and small enterprises in developing countries. *J Int Dev* 22(5):641–658. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1717>
- Gössling S (2017) Tourism, information technologies and sustainability: an exploratory review. *J Sustain Tour* 25(7):1024–1041
- Heeks R (2010) Do information and communication technologies (ICTs) contribute to development? *J Int Dev* 22(5):625–640. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.1716>
- Hunter C (1997) Sustainable tourism as an adaptive paradigm. *Ann Tour Res* 24(4):850–867. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383\(97\)00036-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0160-7383(97)00036-4)
- Inversini A, Rega I (2016) eTourism for socio-economic development. *Symphonya. Emerg Issues Manag* 0(1). <https://doi.org/10.4468/2016.1.07inversini.rega>
- Inversini A, Rega I, Pereira IN, Bartholo R (2015) The rise of eTourism for development. In: *Information and communication technologies in tourism 2015*. Springer, Cham, pp 419–431
- Kirsten M, Rogerson CM (2002) Tourism, business linkages and small enterprise development in South Africa. *Dev South Afr* 19(1):29–59
- Kleine D, Unwin T (2009) Technological revolution, evolution and new dependencies: what's new about ict4d? *Third World Q* 30(5):1045–1067. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590902959339>
- Krippendorff J (2010) *Holiday makers*. Taylor & Francis <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781136357558>
- Murphy PE (1985) *Tourism: a community approach*. Methuen, London
- Nash D (1989) Tourism as a form of imperialism. *Hosts and guests: The anthropology of tourism*. *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* 2:37–52
- Park D-B, Yoon Y-S (2009) Segmentation by motivation in rural tourism: a Korean case study. *Tour Manag* 30(1):99–108. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2008.03.011>
- Rega I, Inversini A (2016) eTourism for development (eT4D): the missing piece in the ICT4D research agenda. *Inf Technol Int Dev* 12(3):19–24
- Scheyvens R (2007) Exploring the tourism-poverty nexus. *Curr Issues Tour* 10(2–3):231–254
- Sharpley R, Telfer DJ (2014) *Tourism and development: concepts and issues*, 2nd edn. Channel View Publications, Bristol
- Simpson MC (2008) Community benefit tourism initiatives – a conceptual oxymoron? *Tour Manag* 29(1):1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2007.06.005>
- Spencer AJ, Buhalis D, Moital M (2012) A hierarchical model of technology adoption for small owner-managed travel firms: an organizational decision-making and leadership perspective. *Tour Manag* 33(5):1195–1208. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2011.11.011>

- Thomas R, Shaw G, Page SJ (2011) Understanding small firms in tourism: a perspective on research trends and challenges. *Tour Manag* 32(5):963–976. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2011.02.003>
- Tosun C (2006) Expected nature of community participation in tourism development. *Tour Manag* 27(3):493–504. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2004.12.004>
- UNTWO (2017) 2017 is the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development. Retrieved 5 May 2017, from <http://media.unwto.org/press-release/2017-01-03/2017-international-year-sustainable-tourism-development>
- Unwin PTH (2009) *ICT4D: information and communication technology for development*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Uriely N, Reichel A, Ron A (2003) Volunteering in tourism: additional thinking. *Tour Recreat Res* 28(3):57–62. Special Issue: Volunteer Tourism
- Wearing S (2001) *Volunteer tourism: experiences that make a difference*. CABI, Wallingford
- Weeden C (2002) Ethical tourism: an opportunity for competitive advantage? *J Vacat Mark* 8(2):141–153. <https://doi.org/10.1177/135676670200800204>
- Zhang X, Song H, Huang GQ (2009) Tourism supply chain management: a new research agenda. *Tour Manag* 30(3):345–358. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2008.12.010>
- Zhao W, Ritchie JRB (2007) Tourism and poverty alleviation: an integrative research framework. *Curr Issues Tour* 10(2–3):119–143