Community involvement and collaboration in tourism development: Lessons learned from three coastal communities in Bohuslän, Sweden

ABSTRACT
The potential of involving local community stakeholders in tourism development is crucial for several reasons, for example it is argued that local involvement should be regarded as both an asset and a condition in successful and sustainable tourism planning and management. However, the fact that the local community is neither homogenous nor static, calls for cyclic and holistic approaches to community involvement coping with the complexity of the local community and its inhabitants. The purpose of this paper is to go beyond shallow and often contra-productive attempts of local stakeholder involvement in tourism development and, by doing so contribute to a better theoretical and practical understanding for how tourism organizations, municipalities and regions could define and implement local participation in destination development.

Theoretically, the paper contributes to the community-based tradition of the field of sustainable tourism development and, as such it highlights the local people of the tourist destination, and the benefits they may reach from tourism as well as the contributions they may have to the development of tourism products, attractions and brands. Local “host” communities are not static, homogenous entities and the local residents of tourist destinations are not passive but rather active community members who have agency and respond to tourism development in a varying and not always predictable ways. Consequently, local community involvement in tourism development is as a multi-layered strategic as well as practical challenge.

Within the EU funded project Coasts of the Future, case-studies were conducted in three coastal communities, in the county of Bohuslän on the Swedish west coast. The communities are in different stages of (tourism) development and are facing different challenges in future development. This study is focused on implementation processes and activities performed in the project in order to increase
local involvement and collaboration between stakeholders in the communities. Stakeholder groups were defined among the real estate owners in the communities, both all-the-year-round households and leisure house owners. Initially, qualitative interviews were conducted with representatives of these stakeholder groups. Thereafter, a survey was distributed to the real estate owners in the communities, measuring community satisfaction in general and satisfaction with tourism development in particular. The results were communicated in the communities through reports and public seminars, including a workshop where a selection of the local inhabitants together with representatives of the municipalities discussed future community development strategies. One observation in this local participatory process was the importance for community members and representatives of the municipalities to meet and discuss the future of the communities in a neutral context.

The main finding of the paper revolves around the importance of having relevant knowledge and resources when approaching the local community and hence, community involvement in tourism development calls for alternative strategies. Consequently, allocation of resources for participatory activities, including increased knowledge of community involvement in tourism development among politicians and civil servants are essential. Furthermore, crucial factors in community participation are bias, selection criterion, municipality’s level of engagement, and feedback activities. The study showed that if local involvement in tourism development is not managed successfully, the risk of causing conflicts of interests and exclusion rather than harmony and inclusion is imminent. Theoretically the study further develops the notion of community involvement and collaboration as integrated and mutually dependent processes.

**Key words:** Community participation, tourism development, community based approach, sustainability, coastal tourism