

ABSTRACT

Policies and Practices of Tourism Industry – A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Study on Central America

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Tourism is an increasingly important global industry. It is the principal export in a third of all developing countries and the primary source of foreign exchange earnings amongst the 49 Least Developed Countries. The Global South is attracting a growing share of global tourism and the international bodies and national governments are recognizing the potential of tourism in economic growth. However, while tourism is a tool for economic growth, there is very little evidence of the connection between development of tourism and poverty reduction. The continuously weakening public sector of developing countries is unable to respond by regulation and control to the growing ecological and social challenges.

Since the 1980s, many of the Central American nations have seen a tremendous growth of tourism. This has affected not only national economies and infrastructures but also local environmental, social and cultural politics. Public planning has become ever more complicated with new actors entering coastal towns and natural parks. For example, Costa Rica is today facing similar problems as Thailand and the Philippines as sex tourism destination, and the country is credited with having the region's largest child prostitution problem. Central American nations now face urgent problems of the model of mass tourism, although the massive breakthrough of tourism business is yet to appear in these countries of significant poverty, insecurity and crime. Many critical activists and researchers see the fast-growing tourism business as a postcolonial form of environmental and cultural aggression and there exists a growing need for finding more sustainable alternatives for tourism development.

This **international comparative study** of three Central American countries, Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua, aims contributing to finding the best solutions, ideas and practices for sustainable tourism business and industry. For this purpose, the project analyzes, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the development of power relations, politics, policies and practices of Central American tourism. At the same time, the study seeks the complex inter-dependencies between public, national and international planning, global tourism, local needs, sustainable development and business interests. Case studies are conducted in all three countries, and comparative macro-analyses of national tourism policies are made. The **research materials** include a wide array of documents, semi-structured interviews, surveys, and results of participatory observation.

Theoretical and **interdisciplinary** framework of the project starts from critical realism (CR). This is an ontologically realist and epistemologically relativist research attitude, in which causal relationships, too, are irreducible to empirical “constant conjunctions”. On a practical level, this kind of research attitude means the development of hermeneutic iconic models. To support this modeling, a considerable part of the study will be based on observation and **participatory study methods**. Another methodological setting applied in the study comes from the practices theory approach. Also such approaches and strategies as community-based tourism (CBT) and pro-poor tourism (PPT) are understood as “methods” in the context of the best planning practices – not only empty good-will concepts or ways of promoting abstract business ideas or ethics.

From the perspective of Finnish development policy and academic development research, this project accords with their clearly pronounced objectives. Tourism is also one of the most important export industries in nearly every country that Finland has a long-term development cooperation partnership with. In addition, the project can be connected to the challenges of the Finnish National Innovation Strategy, which emphasizes such concepts as globalization, global mobility, tourism and traveling, sustainable development and new technologies.

KEYWORDS: sustainable development; tourism; poverty reduction, urban, environmental and regional planning; public policies; Central America; Costa Rica, Honduras; Nicaragua; corporate social responsibility pro-poor tourism; community-based tourism; ecotourism