



Influential Factors of Community Participation in Tourism: A Study on Sunamganj, Bangladesh

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Abstract

In recent years, although there have been some works on community-based tourism in Bangladesh, very few studies have identified the features that have a major influence on community participation in tourism. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to analyze what influences the participation of local communities in tourism in Sunamganj district, Bangladesh. To this end, an exploratory followed by a descriptive study was conducted. Initially, the authors identified five important and relevant variables by conducting in-depth interviews with the 15 community residents and analyzing the thematic approach. Based on the variables, 50 respondents were subsequently surveyed. A judgmental sampling method was followed for choosing these respondents. In this paper, multiple regression analysis using SPSS was used to determine how the identified variables contribute to community participation. The results indicated that a higher degree of positive perceptions about tourism ($\beta = 153$, $p < .05$), greater knowledge concerning tourism services ($\beta = 117$, $p < .05$), a higher level of coordination among tourism stakeholders ($\beta = 148$, $p < .05$), an enhanced degree of resource management capability ensure a higher level of community participation. However, contrary to common

knowledge, the perceived living condition was found to have an insignificant effect on local communities' participation in tourism. The findings and recommendations outlined in this paper is expected to help the government, tourism stakeholders, and policymakers of Bangladesh to engage the community in tourism activities.

Keywords: Influential factors, local community participation, tourism, Bangladesh.

Introduction

The tourism literature has included extensive discussions on Sustainable Tourism Development (STD) over the decades. For STD, there is a continuous appeal for coordination and collaboration among the potential stakeholders at all levels of tourism development to understand the interests and perceptions of the relevant stakeholder (Anuar & Sood, 2017; Backman & Munanura, 2015; Bello, Lovelock, & Carr, 2017). Exclusively, the active participation and engagement of local communities have been identified as an important consideration for the development of sustainable tourism destination (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2006; Cater, 1994; Charleen, Kumbirai, & Forbes, 2014; Choi & Sirakaya, 2005; Cole, 2006; D'Amore, 1992). In community-based sustainable tourism, the local community residents must own and

Significance | Analysing Sunamganj's community tourism factors aids sustainable development, guiding Bangladesh's policymakers and stakeholders for inclusive tourism engagement.

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manage the tourism (Dogra & Gupta, 2012), they must have some control over tourism development (Dola & Mijan, 2006) by being involved in the tourism vision, goals, and strategies development and implementation process (Drake, 1991). Despite this notion, it is found that the local community residents are reluctant to involve themselves in initiatives, activities, and decision-making processes of tourism development (Drake, 1991; Eshliki & Kaboudi, 2012). Many researchers consider that this situation is particularly observed in developing countries (Drake, 1991; Eshliki & Kaboudi, 2012). To understand the scenarios in developing countries, this paper focuses on Sunamganj, a district located in the north-eastern part of Bangladesh. Though there have been some works on community-based tourism in this country, very few studies have identified the factors that influence the locals most to participate in tourism. Therefore, the key objective of this study is to analyse what influences the community to participate in tourism in Sunamganj district, Bangladesh. This paper adds value to the existing literature and sets a benchmark for future researchers in this research context; besides, the findings and recommendations outlined in this paper are expected to help the government, tourism stakeholders, and policymakers of Bangladesh to engage the community in tourism activities.

This research paper is organized into three sections. In the first section, the factors that affect community participation in tourism are discussed by reviewing a range of literature. The second section covers the detailed research context, methods, and techniques (data collection and analysis). In the third section of this paper, study findings (data analysis result), discussion, and some suggestions to ensure active community participation in tourism are presented.

Materials and Methods

In this section, the importance of community participation in tourism is covered, and then the probable aspects which affect their involvement are also identified. Authors of this study believe that if the issues affecting the community participation are well identified and managed, then the solution of those may influence them to participate in tourism.

Community Participation and Tourism

The concept of community-based tourism (CBT) refers to conducting tourism by ensuring the participation of the local community (Graci, 2013; Harrison & Reilly, 2011). It is well recognized that community residents are directly affected by the positive and negative impacts of tourism (Hawkins, 1993) and thus their involvement in the tourism development process is of utmost importance (Htun, Mizoue, & Yoshida, 2012; Jamal & Stronza, 2009; Kebede, Bekele, & Woldeamanuel, 2014). Though poor community participation in tourism is a global concern (Kebete & Wondirad, 2019; Kernel, 2005), its extent differs from developed to developing countries (Kibicho, 2008; Kim, Park, &

Phandanouvong, 2014). According to Louw and Smart (1998), in most developing countries local community participation in the tourism development decision-making process is often limited and often neglected. In this vein, Louw and Smart (1998) argued that the exclusion of the local community from the participation of tourism development decision-making process as a very common practice in the developing nations, though the engagement of local communities in the tourism decision-making process is fundamental to the success of tourism development in the developing nations (Mitchell & Reid, 2001; Muneem & Avi, 2017).

Issues affect community participation in tourism

In the context of developing countries, issues such as lack of coordination among stakeholders, limited financial resources, lack of tourism service knowledge due to the low literacy level of the residents (Murphy, 1988; Prentice, 1993; Rahman, 2019; Saufi, O'Brien, & Wilkins, 2014), lack of awareness, imbalance distribution of power, the inappropriate legal system, poor living conditions (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011; Shoeb-Ur-Rahman, 2019) preclude community residents' participation in tourism. Because of the centrally controlled governmental structures of developing countries, local community residents rarely get chances to participate and exchange their opinion or decision at the operational level (Saufi et al., 2014; Simmons, 1994; Teye, Sirakaya, & Sönmez, 2002). Rahman (2019) found that 'the power structure and politics play the central role in resource decision-making, which hinders broader stakeholder (especially community) involvement in the decision-making processes.' Similarly, Tosun (2000) identified three institutional constraints to local community participation in tourism, which are centralized decision-making systems, the reluctance of tourism planners and policymakers to include local communities in the tourism decision-making process, and the lack of knowledge among local communities regarding how they could involve. Besides, Prentice (1993) also viewed power disparities in the planning, implementation, and structural levels and distrust in the tourism development authorities as major impediments to the community's participation in tourism. The lack of expertise among tourism officials regarding the inclusion of local communities in tourism is another barrier to community participation in tourism development (Tosun & Timothy, 2001). For the imbalance power distribution, owners (residents) are deprived of enjoying the benefits gained from tourism, and distrust in tourism authorities makes local people reluctant to accept the tourism associated changes (development, touristic activities) in their local environmental setting. Among communities, people who are poor show low levels of interest in participating in tourism development initiatives (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2011) and they spend most of their time and energy on their survival only (Tosun & Timothy, 2001). Eshliki reported that cultural, political, and poor financial condition of local community hinders their participation

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics.

Constructs	Mean	SD	N
Community Participation	3.73	.906	50
Perceptions about Tourism (PAT)	3.85	.983	50
Knowledge about Tourism Services (KATS)	3.99	.981	50
Perceived Living Conditions (PLC)	4.07	1.009	50
Perceived Co-Ordination (PC)	3.47	1.071	50
Perceived Resource Management Capability (PRMC)	3.91	.821	50

Table 2. Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.671 ^a	.450	.441	.678	1.963

a. Predictors: (Constant), PAT, KATS, PLC, PC, PRMC

b. Dependent Variable: Community Participation

Table 3. Regression Analysis Results.

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	110.500	5	22.100	48.098	.000 ^b
	Residual	135.087	294	.459		
	Total	245.587	299			

a. Dependent Variable: Community Participation

Table 4. Multiple Regression Coefficients Predicting Community Participation.

Independent Variables		B	SEB	β	T	Tolerance	VIF
1	PAT	.132	.042	.153	3.14*	.919	1.088
	KATS	.100	.040	.117	2.49*	.849	1.177
	PLC	.073	.041	.081	1.75	.881	1.135
	PC	.126	.038	.148	3.29*	.923	1.084
	PRMC	.588	.055	.532	10.63*	.746	1.341

Note: * $P < .05$

in tourism (Tosun & Timothy, 2001). Community involvement in decision-making is avoided by the tourism industry dominants as they perceive it will add costs and decrease profit (Tosun & Timothy, 2001), and often community's participation is limited to a legitimizing approval process (Teye et al., 2002). In developing countries particularly in rural areas, local community residents are not aware of the significance of their participation because of their low educational level and not the availability of adequate tourism development information to them considered Knowledge as an important component required for empowerment, and to access a range of tourism information, communities must need knowledge (Murphy, 1988; Simmons, 1994). Kebede (2017) found that community residents with high levels of education are more interested in development projects than the less educated ones. Based on the findings, it can be said that the lack of tourism service knowledge among local communities is a result of their low education level, and this factor lowers down their tourism benefit access (Tosun & Timothy, 2001). So, based on the above discussion, it is evident that active coordination among the tourism stakeholders, community's knowledge and perception regarding tourism, their living conditions, resource management capabilities, and power structure have a major effect on community participation in tourism. Bangladesh hosts a lot of tourist attractions including the longest unbroken sandy beach, coral island, the largest mangrove forest, hilly areas, diversified ethnic cultures, heritage, archaeological sites, religious sites, and many more to appeal the tourists. Additionally, in the north-eastern part of the country there exist huge tourism treasures including water bodies, Freshwater swamp forests, tribal cultures, hills, waterfalls, etc. for the tourists which are almost unexplored. For conducting this research the north-eastern part of Bangladesh, the Sunamganj district of Sylhet division was chosen considering the richness and in-depth information regarding the socio-cultural and touristic phenomenon. This district contains a Ramsar site, Tanguar haor- a unique wetland ecosystem, which is located in the Dharmapasha and Tahirpur Upazilas. The Tanguar haor is the source of earning livelihood for more than 40,000 people. For the last couple of years, this haor has successfully attracted so many tourists from home and abroad, and generated significant tourism revenue (Turker et al, 2016), though the economic and living status of the local communities has not upgraded which does not reflect the true effect of tourism development. To identify the factors that affect the local communities' participation in tourism of Sunamganj district in the Sylhet division, both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed in this research. Following Woodley (1999) and Yitbarek et al. (2013), the mixed-method approach was utilized in this research. Firstly, for collecting the primary research variables, a semi-structured interview technique was followed. The judgmental sampling technique was used to identify the sample population. A

total of 15 local community residents of the study area were interviewed, and each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The recorded interviews were transcribed and reviewed. Then, following Yüksel, Bramwell, and Yüksel (2005), a thematic approach was implemented to categorize interview data. Thus, the authors identified five important variables which are i) perception about tourism, ii) knowledge about tourism services, iii) perceived living conditions, iv) perceived co-ordination, and v) perceived resource management capability of the community residents. A total of 50 respondents were surveyed. The respondents' category covers community residents and local tourism stakeholders. Finally, the multiple regression analysis using SPSS was used to determine how the identified variables contribute to community participation.

Results and Discussion

The authors of this study carried out multiple regression analyses to ascertain the influence of perception about tourism, knowledge about tourism services, perceived living conditions, perceived co-ordination, and perceived resource management capability on predicting community participation. Initially, the assumptions of linearity, normally distributed errors, multicollinearity were inspected and met. The means, standard deviations, and other relevant descriptive statistics can be found in Table 01. Table 02 reveals that the relationships between the actual and predicted values of the outcome variable (community participation) are fairly moderate ($R = .671$). Adjusted R square indicates that 44.1% variance in community participation was explained by the model. According to Cohen (1988), this is a large effect. Table 03 indicates that the combinations of all the independent significantly predicted community participations, $F(5, 294) = 48.098, p < .001$. However, to ascertain the relative importance and significance of each predictor, the authors relied on Table IV. As evident from Table 04, all the predictors included in the research significantly and positively contribute to community participation in tourism except perceived living conditions. This indicates that a higher degree of positive perceptions about tourism ($\beta = 153, p < .05$), greater knowledge about tourism services ($\beta = 117, p < .05$), the higher level of coordination among tourism stakeholders ($\beta = 148, p < .05$), and enhanced degree resource management capability ensure a higher level of community participation in tourism. Beta weights values indicate that perceived resource management capability contributes most significantly to the community participation in tourism, followed by perceived coordination, perception about tourism, and knowledge about tourism services.

Conclusions

This study investigates predictors of local community participation in tourism in Sunamganj district, Bangladesh. Results highlight that community perceptions of tourism, knowledge of tourism services, networking, effective stakeholder coordination, and community

resource management significantly influence participation levels. Particularly, perceived resource management capability emerges as the strongest predictor, followed by perceived coordination, tourism perceptions, and tourism knowledge.

The research underscores the need for policymakers and stakeholders in Sunamganj to prioritize these factors to enhance community involvement in tourism. Recommendations include regular training and awareness programs by government and non-governmental organizations to improve technical knowledge, resource management capabilities, and tourism perceptions among locals. Additionally, establishing a dedicated tourism monitoring and coordination cell is proposed to foster effective networking among stakeholders. These efforts aim to ensure sustainable community engagement in tourism planning and development, thereby maximizing benefits for both residents and the tourism industry in Sunamganj.

Author contributions

M.A.R.A., conceptualized and developed the methodology, T.A.B. and K.T., prepared the original draft, M.N., and M.M.H., collected data reviewed and edited the writing.

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Competing financial interests

The authors have no conflict of interest.

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