

Actors, Discourses and Interfaces of Rural Tourism Development at the Local Community Level in Slovenia: Social and Political Dimensions of the Rural Tourism Development Process

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This paper addresses the policy and politics of the development of rural tourism at the local level in Slovenia and links it to the issue of sustainability. Since gaining its independence in 1991 the government has been formulating policies for the development of tourism and rural development. Using an actor perspective, this paper focuses on the different local social actors who are trying to 'transform' rural tourism development to fit their perceptions, needs, values and agendas. It also evaluates the gap between the rhetoric of national planning and policy concerning the development of tourism in rural areas, and what actually happens at the local level. From the case study it can be observed that rural tourism development in Slovenia, as elsewhere, is a negotiated process, as different actors involved in the on-going development process see it from genuinely different perspectives. Consequently, it is argued that any assessment of sustainability is relative and socially constructed.

Introduction

This paper addresses the policy and politics of the development of rural tourism at the local level in Slovenia and attempts to relate it to the issue of sustainability. Since gaining its independence in 1991, Slovenia has been actively creating a niche for itself in the new Europe. The government has been formulating policies on all aspects of national life, including the development of tourism and rural development. Some of the new national policies approach tourism in the countryside as a potential source of income generation that will enhance the viability of rural communities (Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry and Food, 1993), while others view the rural landscape and the human and cultural capital of the local communities as potential tourism products (Ministry of Economic Affairs, 1995).

Using an actor perspective this paper focuses on the different local social actors who are trying to 'transform' rural tourism development to fit their perceptions, needs, values and agendas. It also evaluates the gap between the rhetoric of national planning and policy concerning the development of tourism in rural areas, and what actually happens on the ground at the local community level. Rural tourism does not develop in a vacuum but is embedded in a given social, political and historical context. In Slovenia, although this implies taking account of the new political reality, the old hierarchies and structures cannot be ignored as attitudes do not change as quickly as events (Verbole, 1999: 257).

It is often argued that sustainable rural tourism development cannot be achieved without the full support of the rural community that it will affect. However, who really decides and who participates (and at the end who benefits and who loses) in rural tourism development are questions that need to be raised as such 'communities' are not homogeneous entities. Neither are local people just passive recipients of externally tailored developmental plans and their impacts. From the case study it can be observed that rural tourism development in Slovenia, as elsewhere, is a negotiated process, as different actors involved in the on-going development process see it from genuinely different perspectives. Consequently, it is argued that any assessment of sustainability is relative and socially constructed.

From a negative end outcome, this paper stresses that the development and implementation of policies and options for the sustainable development of rural tourism should not only include an evaluation of which tourism assets need to be sustained and how. It should also embrace an evaluation of the various interests of the social actors, their organising practices and strategies, the power relations, the different discourses and manifested in the process of development and decision-making and how these reflect upon the development of rural tourism. In short, this paper argues that any assessment of sustainable (tourism) development should take into consideration its political dimension.

During the last two decades the European countryside and rural communities have been affected by profound changes. In the mid-1980s, many countries, including Slovenia, began to look for alternative and (it was hoped) more profitable economic activities to help revitalise the countryside and its rural communities, as it became obvious that the agricultural sector alone did not hold the key to rural development.

One of the main strategies of this search was to identify ways of encouraging the diversification of rural economic activities. This process brought with it the notion that tourism could be used to help revitalise rural environments and communities. But, as Long (1989) has suggested, there is often a large gap between the rhetoric of national planning and policy concerning the development of tourism in rural areas and the reality of what happens at the local community level. The outcomes of the intervention may differ substantially from those planned. In this context, the concept of intervention is primarily used to refer to state policy and its implementation by government and development institutions, including research bodies. Planned intervention (i.e. measurements and policies) can be 'top-down' or externally organised. However, intervention can also be initiated 'bottom-up', aiming to advance local interests and thereby reshape state policy actions (Long, 1984: 177–179).

The rural tourism development process involves many social actors who continually reshape and transform plans and policy through interaction and negotiation. Local people are not passive recipients of the consequences of rural tourism development policy, but are instead capable of making the most out of a given situation (i.e. initiating a developmental project through the bottom-up approach).

It is of vital importance to understand the sociopolitical dynamics of the process taking place within the local communities as rural tourism develops. This is necessary to ensure that the development of rural tourism is sustainable,

including allowing for the participation of the local community in the development, as well as for participation of all the members in the given community. Therefore, several questions need to be asked. Who initiates the development process? How are the terms of development negotiated? Who gets to participate in the process? Who decides? And who actually benefits or loses from the development process?

The insights into the rural tourism development process presented in this paper were drawn from an actor-oriented perspective (Long, 1989, 1992, 1997; Long & van der Ploeg, 1989; Villarreal, 1992; Verbole, 1999). The actor-oriented approach allows us to conceptualise rural tourism development as a dynamic, on-going process that is shaped and reshaped by social actors.

This actor-oriented approach, to the ethnographic exploration of the social realities of rural development processes was conducted in Pišce, a small rural community of some 1200 inhabitants in south-eastern Slovenia. Data were gathered during three years of qualitative field research (1994–1997) using informal and semi-structured interviews, (extended) case studies (Mitchell, 1983), life histories (Long & Roberts, 1984), participatory observation (Bernard, 1988) and situational analysis (Long, 1992).

Opting for a qualitative and non-positivist inquiry highlighted the dynamic processes of social change. Among others, Strauss and Corbin (1990) contend that studying issues of change should involve in-depth investigation and the incorporation of [social] action/interaction, as this varies over time in response to changes in conditions. Using an actor-oriented approach, it was important to identify the problems and concepts as perceived and presented by the social actors themselves, and to look for similarities and/or differences in their social interpretations and to investigate the types and content of the social relationships among them. This implied an investigation into social configurations, i.e. the patterns of social order and organisation and their fragility or fluidity (Verbole, 1999: 64–74). Hence a number of contrasting social settings – bars, the community centre, administrative bodies, voluntary associations, societies and clubs – were chosen specifically to seek out the different actors' points of view and to learn more about the differing discourses. The author travelled to the fieldwork area ten times for different lengths of time, returning every three to five months, and occasionally the schedule was adjusted to catch the 'momentum' of the occasion (e.g. a local meeting).

The ethnographic data were collected according to the grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and the theoretical approach sought to uncover the various layers of Pišce's reality that emerged from the negotiations and struggles between the various actors.

Brief Background to Rural Tourism in Slovenia

Some rural areas of Slovenia, such as Gorenjska and the Upper Savinja Valley, have a long tradition of rural tourism, or more correctly of agritourism, going back to the nineteenth century and which by the 1930s was well established. After the Second World War tourism in rural areas stagnated as efforts were redirected to the development of tourist resorts in coastal and mountainous areas. A real boom in agritourism occurred in the late 1970s, fuelled in part by the govern-

ment's growing concern to secure additional income for mountain farmers – related to the small size of the farms, limited production conditions and continuing depopulation trends – and helped along by the public agricultural advisory service, which trained special advisors for supplementary activities and work for farm families (Verbole, 1997).

Over the last 25 years, various forms of agritourism have expanded slowly across Slovenia, primarily to provide a secondary source of income for farm-family households (Verbole, 1997). These include stationary agritourism, with farms offering full board, half board or bed and breakfast arrangements, and guests staying either with the farm family or in a guest house; and excursion agritourism revolving around 'open-door farms', where tourists could eat and explore farm-life for a few hours, and the recent phenomenon of 'camping on the farm'. However, despite much investment – significant sums in special loans and grants provided to promote the development – agritourism did not provide the hoped-for benefits. For example, many farmers and farm-women found tourists too demanding, for example, wanting luxuriously furnished rooms they were unable to provide and food that was rarely served at the farmers' own table. Farm-women complained that catering for tourists put too much extra pressure on them. Farmers reported that tourists damaged the farmland and mistreated the farm animals (Verbole, 1995, 1998).

The interest in agritourism and in other forms of rural tourism increased as the socioeconomic situation in Slovenia changed in the late-1980s, owing to the political, economic and social transformations at that time (Verbole, 1999: 212–222). Privatisation, for example, provided the foundations for economic restructuring, including the development of alternative forms of rural tourism, recreational enterprises and attractions and different forms of accommodation. The newly emerging private rural enterprises developed rapidly, providing various activities which include rafting and mountain biking, and they began to compete with family farms for the available resources and income.

To be able to follow up the demands and meet the needs of the changing situation in Slovenia's countryside, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Food established a Centre for Rural Development and Village Revitalisation (CRPOV) in 1991. Subsequently, the CRPOV has promoted the development of rural areas through specific projects in which rural tourism is often given an important role (Ministry for Agriculture, Forestry and Food, 1993).

Pišece: Complexities of the Transformation Process of Rural Tourism Development at the Local Level

Many local communities became interested in getting involved with the CRPOV programme and in developing rural tourism. Some members of Pišece's local community adopted various strategies to enable their local community and themselves to be enrolled in such a project.

In 1993 a group of Pišece local residents, who later called themselves the CRPOV Initiative Board (CIB), decided to take action as they no longer wanted to live in an 'underdeveloped' and slowly dying local community. They voiced the concern felt by many local people that there was a generally held negative image of Pišece as an isolated, dying community, with high unemployment, low

income-generation opportunities, lack of appropriate housing and nothing to keep the younger generation at home. In addition, the general feeling in Pišece was that the state and municipality authorities were showing little or no interest in local people's problems and needs (Verbole, 1999). Through the efforts of a student from Pišece, the villagers enlisted assistance from the University of Ljubljana, and an international workshop on rural development in peripheral areas was held in 1994 in a well-known spa resort close to Pišece.

Pišece krajevna skupnost

Pišece *krajevna skupnost* is situated in the Posavje region in the south-east of Slovenia, less than 20 km from the border with Croatia (Figure 1). The term *krajevna skupnost* ('local community') refers to a sub-municipal administrative area that is usually made up of several neighbouring settlements. Almost the whole of the Slovenian–Croatian border region is underdeveloped and demographically threatened as a result of past development policies (Gosar and Klemenčič, 1994; Ravbar, 1994). The *krajevna skupnost* includes five settlements. Pišece village with its 400 inhabitants is the administrative seat and the centre of this 'local community', with a primary school, church, community centre, post-office, a few public houses, shops and a bus station. Set in a picturesque landscape, surrounded with vineyards, Pišece village appeared to possess the potential to develop as an attractive tourist destination: a relatively well-developed infrastructure within the local context, a favourable climate, vineyards and wine cellars, forests and river nature walks, cultural and historical heritage (a blacksmith's museum, a castle and a church dating back to the 13th century), hospitable people and good food. In addition, Pišece is situated close to several health resorts, which attract thousands of tourists every year who might be interested in something new – Pišece had another asset, an active Tourist Society. Tourist societies are local branches of Slovenia's Tourist Association, a non-governmental non-political organisation established in 1905 to stimulate the development of tourism and to provide links between tourism and local people (Verbole, 1999). Set against these positive aspects were a lack of accommodation for tourists and an ageing local population which was relatively uneducated, both in general terms and with regard to tourism and tourism-related services (Rus, 1995).

Yet Pišece had a history of tourism dating back to the early 1960s. In that period, hunting became increasingly popular among Slovenia's political elite, and business travellers from other parts of the then Yugoslavia regularly visited. In the early 1970s foreign hunters followed the local elite and became regular guests (Verbole, 1999: 142). The local Tourist Society, which for more than 35 years had been the major force behind rural tourism development, had 30 beds to offer, and Pišece was a popular day-trip destination for gastronomes from Slovenia and Croatia who wanted to taste local specialities served in local inns and also for occasional tourists from the nearby health resort. The mid-1980s were significant for rural tourism in terms of the public recognition of Pišece's achievements in becoming an attractive tourist destination at the local as well as the national level: in 1985 Pišece was chosen as the most beautiful place in the municipality, and a year later it won the same award in a national context. But tourism also started to decline (Verbole, 1999).

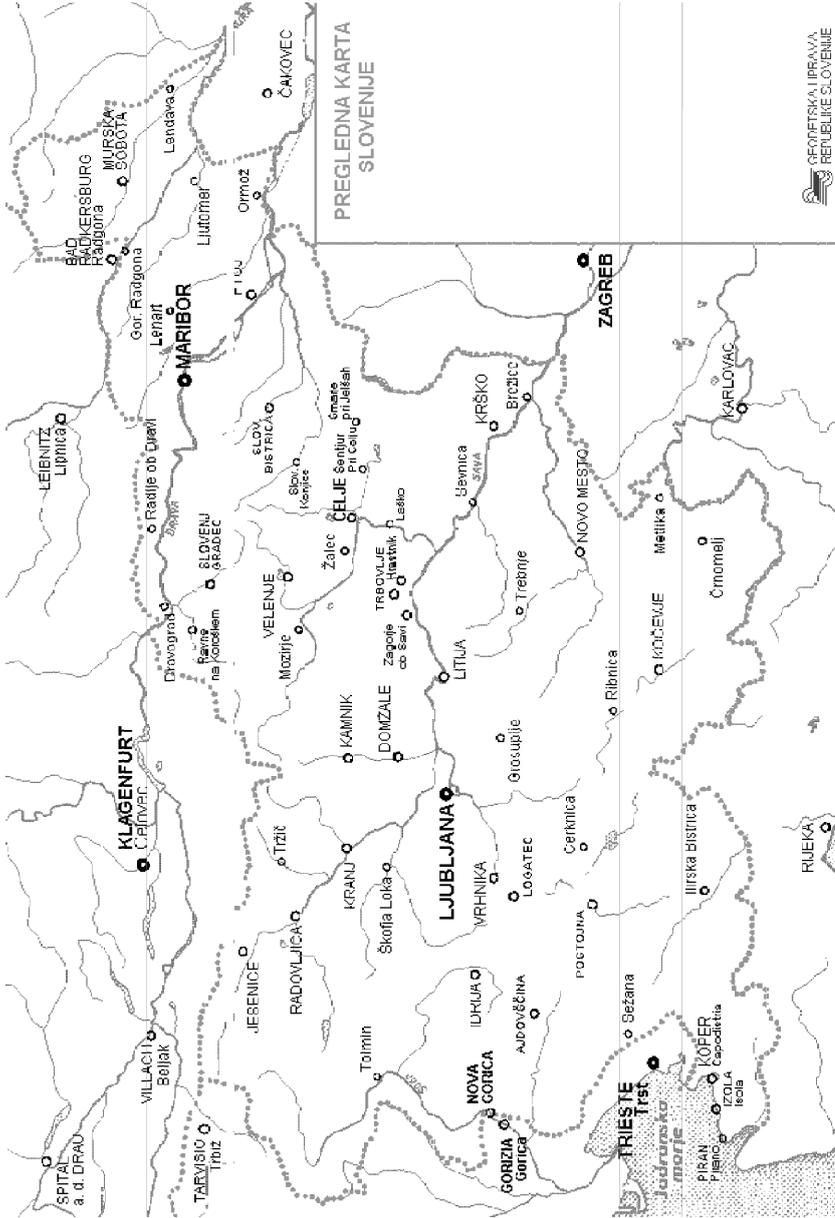


Figure 1 Map of Slovenia
Source: <http://www.sigov.si/rgu/eng/images/pk.gif>

As it subsequently emerged, sociopolitical dynamics would play an important role in determining the success of attempts to develop Pišece.

Local and external actors: The first signs of power asymmetries and local divisions

The 1994 Workshop, organised jointly by the University of Ljubljana and the University of Klagenfurt, was largely devoted to paper presentations, most of which dealt with rural development in peripheral areas, complemented by comparative field trips to peripheral areas in Slovenia (Pišece) and Austria (Eissenkapel). During the official session, a group of young villagers from Pišece participated actively (most of them were members of the CIB), discussing the problems of their community with the professionals. Prominent local figures such as the mayor dropped in for a few minutes each day. However, the official representatives of the Pišece community were conspicuous by their absence, which triggered questions about local power relations and dynamics. The concept of power in this paper relates not only to the ability to influence others, but also to the strategies and means that the various actors use to negotiate the most favourable terms for development (Bernstein, 1978). In addition, power is not seen as something one can own but as an outcome of negotiation (Clegg, 1989).

The public gathering was a window onto Pišece's social reality, which is here defined as being made up of differing cultural perceptions and social interests and constituted by the past and on-going social and political struggles that take place between the social actors involved (Long & van der Ploeg, 1989). It exposed what was in local people's minds and revealed their expectations – better roads, an enlarged school building, a renovated church, enrolment in a CRPOV project, specific benefits from experts, how to make Pišece more attractive for tourists. Some key actors were identified during this phase and, in addition to collective interests, more individual agendas also became apparent. At this stage, the asymmetries between the formal authorities of the *krajevna skupnost* and newly emerging organisational forms (such as the CIB) could be observed.

Local and external actors' involvement in Pišece's early attempts to develop rural tourism

The following were identified as key actors in the process of rural tourism development in Pišece:

- *A group of young intellectuals (recent graduates and students)*. Their main 'collective' objective was to ensure that Pišece should rid itself of its peripheral image and that they (the young people) should have the opportunity to live and work in Pišece. They hoped that the 1994 Workshop would help them to achieve their dreams. As the process evolved, five young villagers joined the CIB, an informal group that initiated the process of change.
- *The CIB*. Its members belonged to three different generations, including the five young villagers mentioned earlier, and three more 'senior' members – the president of the Tourist Society, the parish priest and the head-master. The CIB established itself as the 'representative' of Pišece in rural tourism development as well as in rural development in general. It also acted as a

mediator between the local community and external actors (e.g. links with the University of Ljubljana), thus establishing a wide web of linkages to networks beyond the boundaries of the local community and to their resources and power.

- *The Roman Catholic Church and the local priest.* The priest was strongly involved in local matters. Early in the process he was identified as one of the key actors in Pišece (i.e. a member of the team that helped to organise the 1994 Workshop, a member of the CIB, a member of the Tourist Society and the Sport Club). The fact that, in the past, the church was unlikely to get involved with community affairs made Father Jože (and the Catholic Church) a very interesting actor to study. His active participation may be seen as an indication that an increase in the influence of the church in secular affairs might be more acceptable today, as well as an indication of the growing pressure of the church to become more active and influential beyond strictly religious matters. Throughout the process, in his attempts to develop Pišece through rural tourism the parish priest not only developed horizontal social networks within the local community, but also lobbied vertically (i.e. with various ministries). The lobbying had a double effect: it helped Father Jože to establish himself as the spokesman of the community at the national level, while it also gave him more 'leverage' among the members of the local community.
- *The local primary school – perceived as the centre of local cultural life – and its headmaster.* Although he did not directly participate in the 1994 Workshop, afterwards he was anxious to get as much information as possible to spread to his network of external actors (i.e. with the University of Klagenfurt in Austria) and to get various projects to keep the school alive. His membership of the CIB allowed for participation in local matters.
- *Various voluntary associations, societies and clubs* through which local people were able to express their interests and to participate in the development of their local community. These associations, societies and clubs represented an important part of local social life. Sometimes they also filled the 'void' in activities that were of less interest to the formal authorities (i.e. leisure activities, development of handicrafts, preservation of the local cultural heritage). An examination of the various voluntary associations, societies and clubs showed how social ties cut across this small community. In total there were 14 different voluntary associations, clubs and societies, ranging from the Tourist Society to the Hunter's Society, and from the Farm Women's Association to the Firemen and to the CIB. The voluntary associations, societies and clubs were important as they enabled local inhabitants to obtain and exchange information as well as to push for possible alternative development. Organisations' expectations and interests in rural tourism development often had much to do with the expectations and interests of its individual members or groups of members who pursued the interests of their clique or group through particular organisational networks (Verbole, 1999: 158). For example, while the common perception was that the economic aspects of tourism development provided important benefits (i.e. the creation of new jobs, additional income, improved infrastructure), several different ideas existed with regards to the type and

extent of rural tourism, ranging from Pišece as a health and recreational resort, as a pilgrimage sight or as a satellite village for commuting workers. Some actors sought to occupy as many key positions as possible in these organisations in order to increase their room for manoeuvre in the local webs of power (i.e. as the president, secretary or treasurer). Although access to voluntary associations, societies and clubs was available to all members of the local community, a dominance in various associations, societies and clubs was observed in terms of two basic social divisions that cut across the Pišece community. The first of these two divisions was between a 'phone' and a 'no-phone group' resulting from a ten-year-old dispute concerning the installation of telephones in the local community. The second social division, between 'reds' and 'blacks', reflected local philosophical and political allegiances. Local people tended to end up in a group or an alliance with people with similar experiences related to the phone dispute or similar religious or political orientation: 'reds' with 'reds' and with the 'no-phone' group; and 'blacks' with 'blacks' and members of the 'phone' group (Verbole, 1999). Thus, in Pišece, the social group, family clan, clique or network to which the actors belonged to was important. Membership of a given group influenced a local's access to information and to the decision-making processes. The actors who did not belong to the 'right' social group were, as suggested by Lukes (1974), actually excluded from participation in many local activities including those that evolved around the development of rural tourism. Social divisions also made it very difficult for actors to shift between the networks and cliques. This is important, for it shows that simple models of tourist development can come to nought if local organisations and their political struggles are not understood and taken into account in planning and implementing rural tourism development policies.

- *The formal authorities of Pišece* – the president and secretary of the *krajevna skupnost*. Traditionally, in rural Slovenia, the president had an important role in solving the 'local community's' ongoing problems and in deciding its future direction by formulating appropriate development strategies (Barbič, 1994). This changed with the introduction of a new system for local self-government in 1994 as the role of the *krajevna skupnost* and its formal representatives of authority were brought to question.

In the past the *krajevna skupnost* played an important role in the development of the 'local community'. Following the new law on local self-government, all the powers of the *krajevna skupnost* were transferred to the municipality. This meant that there were now fewer opportunities to pursue 'local interests' within the municipality's development policy.

The welcoming formalities at the 1994 Workshop, which could be considered to be characteristic of Slovenia's rural culture at official or important gatherings, indicated that a new sociopolitical order was emerging in Pišece. The parish priest was included in the programme and the president of the *krajevna skupnost* was the last to deliver his speech (Verbole, 1999: 93). This would have been unlikely to happen in the past, when the president of the *krajevna skupnost* was one of the most important people in the community. It was observed in Pišece

that, while the official authorities were not interested in developing the Pišece area, informal groups (e.g. the CIB) were trying to extend their room for manoeuvre and wield power to be able to initiate change through the development of rural tourism.

Reflecting on how the 1994 Workshop came about, it may be recalled that it was initiated by an informal group of villagers, the CIB, who made contact directly with a research institution, by-passing the *krajevna skupnost* and partly also the municipality. The event was organised with the help of the local community's informal networks and was supported by external actors – through the networks of 'friends of friends' (Boissevain, 1974). Local organisations (i.e. cliques, family clans, voluntary associations, societies and clubs) played an important role in this process.

The struggle to wield power over the rural tourism development process also brought to the surface the two previously mentioned social divisions. These divisions and cleavages were not initially apparent, but over time proved to be crucial factors in the decision-making processes and for lines of communication in the local community. Communication between the 'blacks' and 'phone' group as opposed to the 'no-phone' and 'reds' group was limited and reserved. These lines of communication – which in Pišece were defined in terms of its history, and the 'powers' they represented – regulated access by locals to different networks and even to social meeting places, such as local bars. It was also observed that, for senior members of the community, the two divisions were more marked than for the members of the younger generation.

Discussion

This study from Slovenia indicates that local communities are not necessarily homogeneous in terms of their resources, interests, needs and views on rural tourism development, and neither do they benefit equally from the development of tourism. In Pišece, a large segment of the population was indirectly involved in rural tourism development at a local level, while only a few local actors had direct influence over the ongoing process. Among them, there was the strong presence of the voluntary sector and the Catholic Church. The emergence of the latter reflected the change to a multi-party democratic system of government and the liberalisation of culture, suggesting that, in the future, new players in the local community development process will have to be reckoned with.

Furthermore, it was observed that local social groups, such as family clans, networks and cliques, were very important in obtaining and controlling access to the decision-making process. It was through the family clans, networks and cliques that various local actors become involved in strategies to promote, control, reshape and make the most of the internal and external interventions. The family clans were built explicitly on kinship ties, while the local networks and cliques were built using other resources, such as religious orientation, political affiliation, value systems and links to actors in positions of power in the local community and to external actors. These factors, importantly, influenced the exclusion and inclusion of actors from certain networks and cliques, thus the rural tourism development process was dominated by the struggles between the

various groups and ended in a stalemate position with no winners and no 'sustainable development'.

However, the stalemate is only a temporary situation in the development process. As argued earlier, rural tourism development is a dynamic and ongoing process, socially constructed and negotiated. Actors constantly redefine it through their social actions and inter-relationships. They may modify their views and interests while new actors may enter the process to accelerate rural tourism development, resulting in the emergence of new power relationships and the construction of new values and interests.

Developing and evaluating 'sustainable rural tourism development' does not happen in a vacuum, as it is embedded in a given social, political and historical context. Studies of tourism development carried out in a specific locational context can contribute greatly to (a) an understanding of how the many aspects of the development process are negotiated at the local as well as the national level; and (b) to the actual development of tourism that can benefit local communities.

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