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TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY EDUCATION ... THE PANACEA FOR SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN THE MALDIVES?

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ABSTRACT

The concept of sustainable tourism has been advocated as a means of maximising tourism's benefits while minimising some of the negative impacts associated with tourism development. Education is crucial in responding to the broader issues within tourism development that affect the wider society (Lewis, 2006). However, in many Small Island Developing States (SIDS), the focus of sustainable tourism development usually only extends to tourism policy, planning and infrastructural development, and in many cases, tourism and hospitality education is either ignored or is not given sufficient emphasis at the policy level. The extent to which education is incorporated at the tourism policy and planning stage could be crucial in achieving sustainable development outcomes, as well as improving the overall human development status of many SIDS. This paper explores the development of tourism and hospitality education in the Maldives highlighting the sustainable development issues facing the educators, government, the tourism industry, and local residents.

Keywords: SIDS, Maldives, Tourism and Hospitality Education, Sustainable Tourism Development

INTRODUCTION

Few industries have as strong an impact on the global community as the tourism industry. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO) the number of international arrivals shows an evolution from a mere 25 million international arrivals in 1950 to a record 842 million in 2006 generating an estimated worldwide receipts of US\$736 billion (WTO, 2007a; 2007b). The WTO's Tourism 2020 Vision forecasts that the number of international arrivals worldwide will increase to almost 1.6 billion, and receipts from tourism (excluding transport) are projected to reach US \$2 trillion by 2020 (WTO, 2001). Such figures highlight that tourism is arguably the world's largest and fastest growing industry and Goeldner and Ritchie (2006) have claimed that tourism has virtually embraced all aspects of human society. Not surprisingly, the industry employs in excess of 234.3 million people worldwide (WTTC, 2006), representing some 8.7 percent of the total global workforce.

Whether measured in terms of tourism's contribution to gross domestic product, foreign exchange earnings, capital investment, or tax contributions, it is the job-creation capacity of the tourism industry that is its most significant feature (Bau, 2006a; Conlin & Bau, 2003; Sharpley, 2002; WTO, 2002; WTTC, 2002).

Education is at the core of successful and sustainable tourism development and has been identified as a "critical element" (Lewis, 2005, p.5) for SIDS. As the design and delivery of quality tourist experiences remains a key task for tourism professionals (Morgan, 2003), a well-educated and well-trained workforce is crucial in achieving comparative advantage in this highly volatile and competitive global tourism industry. However, for many SIDS, such as in

the Maldives, the sustainable development of the tourism industry is constrained by unskilled employees and an acute shortage of skilled labour. In the contemporary context of globalisation and maintaining competitive advantage, coupled with demand for an increased supply of skilled employees in the tourism sectors to deliver a consistent quality product, SIDS educators must continually review the tourism education situation to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the various stakeholders. This paper, therefore, will use the case of the Maldives as a SIDS to highlight and discuss the challenges facing tourism and hospitality educators and the sustainable development implications for the education sector, government, tourism industry, and local residents.

TOURISM IN SIDS

Characterised by their small size and geographic isolation, SIDS have been historically reliant on traditional industries such as agriculture and fishing for their economic survival (Freitag, 1994; Hall & Page, 1996). Inadequate natural resources, fragmented small economies, and a vulnerability to exogenous factors such as natural disasters and global market shifts (Belle & Bramwell, 2005; Croes, 2006; Douglas, 2006; Mowforth & Munt, 2003), have meant that SIDS, like developing countries, often have no other viable economic alternatives to improve their marginal economic status (Brown, 1998; Croes, 2006; Liu & Wall, 2006). Therefore, the opportunities afforded by tourism have enticed many SIDS to embrace the tourism industries as very often, tourism represents the only viable means of earning much needed foreign exchange, creating employment and attracting overseas investment (Sharpley, 2002).

Archer, Cooper, and Ruhanen (2005) argue that tourism seems to be more effective than other industries in generating employment and income in the less developed regions of a country where alternative opportunities for development are more limited. However, in SIDS such as the Maldives, the extent to which tourism has been sought as a development option and a source of national revenue has all but destroyed many traditional industries (Shakeela, 2002). If the tourism industry expands at a faster rate than that of the human resources development of the country, the full benefit of tourism is not tapped as significant economic leakages out of the local community occur in the form of expatriate employment, reducing the net benefits of tourism (Boniface & Cooper, 2005). In this view, "the industry and the government need to consider the development of human resources as a strategic, long term investment which is absolutely necessary for the survival and growth of tourism" (Conlin & Titcombe, 1995, p.66).

TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY EDUCATION IN SIDS

Zimmermann (2006) points out that sustainable tourism management needs to involve local communities. This supports Jamieson's (2003) view that sustainable tourism development requires the establishment of education training programmes to improve public understanding and enhance business, vocational and professional skills especially for the poor and women. However, although extensive research has been conducted in the field of tourism planning and development, up until very recently, little has been done in the field of tourism education, particularly higher education. As Cooper, Shepherd, and Westlake (1996, p.4) suggest, "the profile of tourism education has been elevated as a result of the increased recognition in government circles of the economic importance of tourism".

Traditionally, the enhancement of service standards has been the main parameter governing the deployment of tourism education and training infrastructure (Liu & Wall, 2006) and in many SIDS this has almost exclusively centred on vocational and technical skills. As most countries devise their strategies for developing tourism human resources in accordance to their own socio-economic and political requirements, often little thought is given as to how this education relates to the existing socio-cultural framework of the host country. The lack of skilled expertise

at the educator and trainer level has also meant that most of the existing curriculum in SIDS has been borrowed from other cultural contexts and is not necessarily applicable to local contexts and stakeholder needs. This has often resulted in discontent with the quality of graduates entering the labour market and disillusionment amongst employers on the employability of graduates.

The challenges facing tourism education in SIDS are also diverse, including the availability of programmes, diversity, access, instructional resources, quality and consistency of training (Craig-Smith & Cooper, 2003), cultural suitability of educational models (Theuns & Go, 1992), private-public involvement (Ernawati & Pearce, 2003; Lewis, 2005), and systematic approaches (Gee, 2002). In analysing the status of human resource development in the Asia-Pacific rim, Gee (2002) found that most countries in the region have tended to focus on physical and capital investment, rather than on human resource issues. Moreover, in some SIDS, the population base is so small and the resources so limited that establishing a tourism and hospitality education and training institution or programme is simply not feasible as educational priorities lay elsewhere (Gee, 2002).

In SIDS such as the Maldives, accessibility to available programmes and facilities is relatively limited in relation to the rapid growth and magnitude of the tourism industry. Often tourism education is provided by a few private and governmental institutions concentrated in major urban areas which make access difficult for students from outerlying islands or provinces. Where tourism education programmes do exist, they vary widely in terms of design, content, teaching methods, examinations, evaluations, and the skills required by graduates. According to Gee (2002), most of the SIDS in Asia-Pacific rim also lack a comprehensive national tourism education and training strategy incorporating systematic planning to meet existing and expected labour force needs.

Attracting young people seeking a career in tourism and hospitality is a complex challenge for many educators and the tourism industry in SIDS. The literature shows that, in many SIDS, tourism is not seen as a high-status economic sector within which to develop a career (Baum & Kokkranikal, 2005; Conlin & Baum, 2003; Riley, Ladkin, & Szivas, 2002). Although this career development view is not unique to island destinations, it does serve to compound the challenges for developing indigenous island human resources (Conlin & Baum, 2003). Additionally, in many SIDS there is relatively low status accorded to tourism-related subjects of study within the higher education system which has caused difficulties in recruiting qualified local instructors.

Where competent instructors are available, problems lie in the level of education provided. Due to the chronic shortages of qualified managerial employees, a large share of resources are disproportionately devoted to management level programmes despite the fact that there has been little or no assessment of the quality or effectiveness of such programmes (Gee, 2002). This is also in spite of the fact that the vast majority of positions in the industry are skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled jobs for which training is largely undertaken through privately sponsored vocational education. The primary emphasis in industry related vocational education and training is on preparing students for the hotel and restaurant sectors while neglecting other sectors such as travel agency and tour operations or air transportation. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that in many SIDS, some sectors of the tourism industry are totally ignored in tourism education.

TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY EDUCATION IN THE MALDIVES

The Republic of Maldives is seen as an example of successful sustainable tourism development with a sophisticated tourism industry, primarily based on the 'one island one resort' policy (Domroes, 2001; Vellas & Bécherel, 1995). Currently, the island destination is going through a

physical expansion to meet the increased demand of the Maldives as a world class tourist destination. According to the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation (MTCA) “the additional 35 islands proposed for tourism is expected to add the much needed 5000 to 7000 beds over the next two to five year period, which will facilitate sustainable expansion of the Maldivian tourism industry” (MTCA, 2006, p.1).

In 2006 approximately 54,000 expatriate employees were working in the Maldives, with over 11,000 employed directly in tourism (MPND, 2007). However, during this same period only 12,000 locals were employed in the sector (MPND, 2007). Under government employment regulation, individual resort operations are required to employ a minimum of 50 percent local workforce where available. However, some resorts do not reach this level of local employment on the basis that there is no locally available skilled labour. Additionally one of the first key policy documents developed for the tourism industry, the First Tourism Master Plan called for placing the responsibility of training employees with the resort operators (Dangroup, 1983). However, this has not been successful as operators view training and education as a recurring cost rather than an investment.

Without doubt the expansion of the Maldivian tourism industry means the creation of new employment. Whether the required skilled employees are available or the required infrastructure to train them is in place is another question. Out of the current total Maldivian population of just over 300,000, the economically active population is 129,000 (MPND, 2007). The projection that by 2010, the tourism accommodation sector alone will require 29,000 employees (MTC A, 2007), magnifies the challenges that face the industry in terms of labour needs. As Liu and Wall (2006) argue, in order for economic benefits of tourism to be realised and retained locally, the nurturing of local capacity is indispensable.

EVOLUTION OF TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY EDUCATION IN THE MALDIVES

Formal specialised training in tourism and hospitality related fields in the Maldives began in 1987, with the opening of the School of Hotel and Catering Services in the capital island Malé. This was a United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and European Union (EU) funded project initially conducted by staff from the United Kingdom (UK). The aim of the project was to meet the urgent need of a skilled local workforce for the fast growing tourism industry. The programmes offered during the UNDP/ EU project were mainly focused at vocational skilled training. Hence the curriculum of the programme offered was based on the British National Vocational Qualifications model. Due to the vocational nature of the programmes offered, the image of the Hotel School among the local community was that of a ‘cooking school’.

The entry requirement for the one- year skilled training certificate programme of the Hotel School was completion of year 10 secondary school education. The first cohort of graduates, which were less than the capacity of 50, were available to join the industry in 1988 and were ‘bonded’ to the government, to serve the tourism industry for a period of 2 years. Although there was a government operated hotel and several guest houses in Malé, during the first few years of the Hotel School’s operation, the graduates’ opportunities to work in Malé were restricted and instead they were encouraged to work on a resort island. At that time, this approach was seen by policy makers as encouraging the locals to participate in the tourism workforce, while it was often seen by the locals as a necessary ‘evil’ and an unavoidable aspect of the industry.

UNDP aid for the project terminated in 1989 and the expenses for the expatriate staff funded by the UNDP were taken over by the European Economic Community (EEC). During this phase, three staff from the then Department of Tourism were trained in Fiji to take over the school. Additionally three top graduates of the Hotel School were employed as trainee instructors and

later sent to Fiji and the UK for higher education. By the end of the UNDP/EU project in 1991, the Hotel School had gradually been handed over to local staff with the exception of the foreign language department. At the end of UNDP/EU project, the Hotel School operated under the umbrella of the Ministry of Tourism (MOT) and in 1995 changed its name to the Institute of Hotel and Catering Services (IHCS). Since 1992, IHCS has been totally financed by the government of the Maldives governed under MOT (now named Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation (MTCA)).

In affiliation with the Birmingham College of Food, Tourism and Creative Studies (BCFTCS) UK, in 1997 IHCS began offering the Business and Technical Education Council (BTEC) National Diploma (ND) in Hotel Catering and Institutional Operations (HCIO) accredited by the EdExcel Foundation, UK. Since then IHCS has improved its human resources to meet requirements of BTEC programmes and by the end of 1999, IHCS had become an independent centre officially able to offer BTEC qualifications. With the offering of an externally accredited ND programme, the image of the 'cooking school' was slowly beginning to fade.

In 1998 the Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE) came into being as a result of a presidential directive in accordance with the Law (Chapter 1, Official Matters, *Javiyani* 1/68, Article 2), with the advice from the Cabinet to consolidate the existing institutions of post-secondary education. With this change in the higher education system, IHCS came under the umbrella of MCHE with the name of Faculty of Hospitality and Tourism Studies (FHTS). MCHE currently comprises of 6 faculties and 2 centres with campuses in the Kaafu Atoll Malé, Villingili and Thulusdhoo, Seenu Atoll Hithadhoo, Haa-Alif Atoll Kulhudhufushi and Gaafu-Alif Atoll Thinadhoo, catering to over 90 per cent of higher education enrolments in the Maldives (Houston & Maniku, 2005).

Furthermore, under the Presidential decree the government also established the Maldives Accreditation Board (MAB) in 2001, within the Ministry of Education and hence independent of MCHE. MAB introduced the Maldives National Qualifications Framework with the key objectives of facilitating the development of a quality assurance mechanism for the post-secondary education sector and providing a framework for recognition of qualifications offered in the Maldives and abroad (MAB, 2001). This system, although different in scale, appears to be modelled largely on the New Zealand Qualifications Authority's model of quality assurance (Baumgart, 2002). MAB has the responsibility of validating the quality of courses and their corresponding awards are offered by both government and private educational providers. It is mandatory for all programmes leading to degrees and higher awards in the Maldives to undergo accreditation (MAB, 2001). The framework also accommodates certificate, advanced certificate, diploma and advanced diploma courses while encompassing both further education and higher education courses. The key change FHTS faced under MCHE was that new certificate level programmes were formulated and the existing programmes were streamlined and accredited from MAB. With this a more formalised and standardised teaching and assessment environment emerged.

With the main FHTS campus in Malé, FHTS also offers vocational programmes in other MCHE regional campuses. In 2004, FHTS started offering two BTEC Higher National Diploma (HND) programmes, one in Travel and Tourism and the other in Hospitality Management, with the primary intention of attracting graduates from the Advanced Level Secondary Education who aspire to become supervisors and attain subsequent managerial roles in the tourism industry. The vision of FHTS to become a premier educational establishment which provides a quality learning environment and experience that meets international standards of the tourism and hospitality profession (MCHE, 2006) seems to be a distant dream as the enrolment and graduate figures have declined steadily over the past 5 years and especially at a time of high graduate demand by the ever more expanding tourism industry. More recently, through a private-public

partnership established in December 2006, vocational training began at the Adaaran Resort at Hudhuranfushi.

In the context of continuing growth in the tourism industry, the higher percentage of expatriates employed in the middle and higher management, and the resulting leakage of tourism revenue, there is a greater demand for local skilled personnel. In 2000, MCHE recognised the need to academically qualify the FHTS staff to be able to conduct undergraduate courses, as well as to meet the industry need for academically skilled managerial employees. Upon the request from MCHE, BCFTCS started to offer a Bachelor of Philosophy (BPhil) and Master of Arts (MA) in Hospitality Management on a block-mode basis using FHTS as the local representative of BCFTCS in the Maldives.

Apart from the five British accredited programmes, FHTS offers seven hospitality vocational certificate programmes of various levels. These certificate programmes include Accommodation Operations; Food and Drinks Services; Front Office Operations; and Pastry and Bakery. Other various short/intensive courses, entry level and specialised programmes targeted at those who are already employed in the tourism industry are also conducted. Apart from the BPhil and MA programmes, almost all the programmes are government subsidised. Despite the fact that these certificate programmes have a very low entry requirement and a very low actual programme student fee, FHTS is unable to attract prospective students. From 1987 onwards FHTS trained (including short/intensive courses) on average around 240 persons per year, although the demand for these jobs is much higher.

With MCHE's vision of becoming a University in 2007, FHTS has revamped and redesigned some of the programmes it offers. A proposal to begin a four year Bachelors degree in Hospitality and Tourism Management has been developed with the guidance of a Fulbright Scholar and has been submitted to MAB for approval.

CURRENT CHALLENGES IN TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY EDUCATION IN THE MALDIVES

The tourism and hospitality sector has been short of skilled staff even from the inception of the industry in the Maldives (Shakeela, 2001). A shortage of qualified employees, both at skill and semi-skilled level has always been a problem, but prior to the 1990s, formal in-house training was undertaken by only a few resorts. Also, due to a lack of response from the private sector, the most significant in-house vocational training programme initiated by the government has virtually ceased. It seems that in the Maldives, the South Asian Integrated Tourism Human Resources Development Programme (SAITHRDP)¹ was progressed only up to the stage of training the trainers and publishing standardised Entry Level programmes. These programmes, which were designed to be conducted in the resorts by the 'in-house trainers' trained by SAITHRDP and the trainees to be eventually certified by IHCS were not successful as the programmes are now conducted by FHTS as entry level programmes, making the SAITHRDP redundant. Even though recently resort operators have intensified their in-house training targeted at improving the services of the respective resorts, the lack of support for the national human resources development initiative as indicated by the SAITHRDP example points towards a conflict of interest.

With very limited availability of resources, FHTS has been unable to meet the demands of the Maldivian tourism industry. As FHTS alone cannot meet the training requirements, the MTCA

¹ A US \$ 10 million project funded by the European Union targeted at the South Asian countries. The vocational qualifications were developed by the local experts in consultations with the EU consultants.

in its Third Tourism Master Plan advocates that FHTS concentrate on diploma, and degree level programmes, while other training institutes conduct accredited short entry level courses as a first step towards a career path (MTC A, 2007). It is recognised that the government would complement the FHTS programmes with the creation of further training opportunities through the development of ‘training resorts’ (i.e. resorts that require training of a certain number of students each year).

Over the last few years, the importance the private sector has given to local human resources development appears to have increased. The private sector actively supports and financially contributes to the government-subsidised courses run by FHTS. At the same time, the Maldives Association of Tourism Industries (MATI) also conducts training programmes in the atolls. Additionally, the Ministry of Higher Education, Employment and Social Security (MHEESS) under a loan agreement² with the Asian Development Bank (ADB) in 2004 started a skills development programme aimed at out-of-school youth. The mandate of the programme is to increase the local semi-skilled level in five key sectors: tourism, fisheries and agriculture, transport, and the social sectors. The key goal of the programme is to increase skilled local participation by 57 percent by 2009 in the selected sectors (MHEESS, 2007). These programmes are conducted in three geographic regions of the country, which include Malé and adjacent atolls, the Northern Development Region, and the Southern Development Region. Additionally, MTCA is seeking the technical assistance of the UNWTO to implement a Human Resource Development Plan (WTO, 2005).

Major obstacles have remained in the Maldivian tourism industry in effectively addressing employment opportunities for local women. Even though the tourism industry is one of the world’s most labour intensive industries, providing an effective source of income and employment, especially to women (Boniface & Cooper, 2005), a key factor that adversely contributes to the problem of tourism related human resources is the socio-cultural environment of the Maldives. Although it is recognised that the women of the Maldives are among the most emancipated in the Islamic world (Dayal & Didi, 2001), even today, a woman working in the tourism industry is regarded with less dignity than one working at a desk job. Currently only 7 percent of resort employees are females out of which only 2 percent are local women (MTCA, 2007). Although no research has been conducted to analyse the issue, personal observation is that the isolated nature of the ‘one resort one island’ status and the limited facilities the resort is able to offer, as well as cultural influences and the negative image of the industry, have discouraged female participation in tourism. However, the financial returns and increases in living standards that tourism has brought to the local community appealed to many local men. For example, unlike the general tourism industry where women work in the housekeeping department as ‘room maids’, in the Maldivian tourism industry, men work as ‘room boys’.

Recently, the industry has also voiced its concern that FHTS staffs are out of touch with the reality of the tourism industry, and that the students’ demands of employers are too high as a result of them being taught to demand better working conditions and pay. Additionally, the ‘blame game’ with regards to what students should study has become evident. This may be because the curriculum content of the programmes was never discussed with the industry nor its relevancy discussed with the stakeholders.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Tourism and hospitality education in many SIDS is still largely dominated by traditional European and North American contexts. If tourism is promoted as a sustainable development

² This is a US \$ 7.5 million project with ADB contributing 80 percent to the total project and the rest financed by the government of Maldives.

tool it is essential that local stakeholders have input into curriculum development. As Lewis (2005, p.14) argues “stakeholder involvement in curriculum decision-making has to be a central part of the whole curriculum development process if tourism education is to contribute to the sustainable development of the tourism industry in small island states”. However, there remains a reluctance to modify these programmes that have usually been developed and implemented by an expatriate consultant who may not have the local socio-cultural knowledge, nor has sought alternative models which are more appropriate to individual SIDS, cultures, and their differing levels and type of tourism development. As such, Croes (2006) suggests that governments should create policies to support tourism and hospitality education in order to provide an intellectual infrastructure that facilitates innovation and value enhancement in SIDS.

As happens in many developing countries, the focus in the Maldives has remained on developing infrastructure while neglecting the vital core of the industry, the skilled and educated labour force. The recommendation by MTCA in its Third Tourism Master Plan calling for FHTS to concentrate on diploma, and degree level programmes, while MTCA focuses on developing ‘training resorts’, is perhaps too little too late for an industry starving for skilled labour. However, this is a positive first step at policy level to address the human resource issues of a multi-million dollar industry. Although training programmes conducted by the ‘training resorts’, FHTS, MATI as well as MHEESS will undoubtedly benefit the tourism industry, questions arise with regard to duplication of resources as well as the quality and consistency of these programmes. Baum’s (2006b) recommendation of implementing tourism education at secondary school level and within mainstream curricula could make a significant long-term contribution to enhance the tourism industry’s image in the Maldives and provide for its future employment needs.

It is now recognised that tourism and hospitality education is a sector moving from uncertainty to maturity as governments recognise the value and scale of jobs created in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Smith & Cooper, 2000). Craig-Smith and Cooper (2003) therefore advocate education institutions build their own local-based tourism education rather than depend on Western experiences in order to meet local industry tourism and hospitality education and training needs. With this regard, tourism and hospitality educators in the Maldives have yet to adopt a broader-based model covering all the major sectors of the industry. Yet in doing so, the Maldives could contribute to the broader sustainable development goals sought by the stakeholders of the industry.

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