



## **COMMUNITY BASED TOURISM-OPPORTUNITY TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE TOURISM DEVELOPMENT (CASE STUDY)**

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### **Abstract**

*The role of local communities is basic in the sustainable tourism development, as these communities have the knowledge and opportunity to have a key role in the management and promotion of destinations. The concept of sustainability is based on the premise that locals are the main actors of development, not only as the main beneficiaries, but also as part of the tourist experience. This will result in the economic development of the area, keeping the population in the area and managing the destinations correctly and sustainably. The concept of Community Based Tourism is a well-known concept in tourism. Local communities are an integral part of tourism development because they are the main stakeholders in tourism development, as the main beneficiaries of benefits and costs associated with tourism development. This paper is based on a case study in the Gjirokastra Region, South Albania. Gjirokastra Region, is a source of tourist value where its offer includes not only cultural heritage but also natural. Tourism initiatives have increased, with the development of alternative forms of tourism such as cultural, mountain, adventure, religion, historical, educational, festival tourism, and mainly the agrotourism sector has an ever-increasing trend. In this paper we argue that this region has opportunities to improve tourist offer, and to turn this rich tourist offer into an integrated tourist product. Through a descriptive analysis study the potentials of this area to develop sustainable tourism. In this regard, this study focuses on the role of community based tourism and opportunities for its development.*

*Keywords: Community Based Tourism, Sustainable Tourism Development, Gjirokastra Region, Albania*



## INTRODUCTION

The term Community Based Tourism (CBT) emerged in the mid 1990s. CBT has been presented as an alternative means to traditional mass tourism in developing countries, and is developed as a community development tool that aids communities in taking control over tourism management and development and delivers benefits to the communities which are generated by tourism activities (Trejos & Chiang, 2009). Although there are many definitions of CBT, the main aspects that characterize it are community control and management, conservation of culture and nature, empowerment, and community development (Zielinski *et al*, 2020). CBT supports local communities and improves livelihoods. CBT is generally small scale and involves interactions between visitor and host community, particularly suited to rural and regional areas (Boronyak *et al*, 2010). CBT is closely linked to sustainable tourism and eco-tourism and thus it is used as a preferable means of supporting natural resource management, especially in developing countries (Yamashita, 2011). The main purpose of CBT is to include local communities in tourism by managing tourism resources and by providing further fundamental infrastructure such as accommodation, restaurants, and additional services to host tourists (Lo & Janta, 2020). CBT has appeared as an attempt to directly deliver the fruits of tourism to the local communities in developing countries (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009), in this way, local community members can manage the destination themselves. CBT is a bottom-up approach to sustainable development used in developing countries to enhance the conservation of natural resources, preserve traditional culture, and generate income at the local level (Yamashita, 2011).

### Why Community Based Tourism?

The involvement in CBT improves the lifestyles and encourages great exchange in social and cultural among the local communities and visitors (Sita & Nor, 2012). According to (Ishihara, 2020) although CBT can be seen from a wide variety of perspectives and has historically been imparted diverse tasks, the participation of the community in tourism has been the central idea of CBT. The benefits of CBT have been popular as a means of supporting biodiversity conservation particularly in developing countries and linking livelihoods with preserving biodiversity whilst reducing rural poverty and achieving both objectives sustainably (Kiss, 2004).

Through CBS, both locals and visitors benefit, as it creates the possibility to create close connection between them. In this way, visitors gain authentic experience during their journey, but at the same time the income that is generated remain within the community<sup>1</sup>.

Essentially, the participation of the local community is important in this industry as it ensures that tourists get a memorable, unforgettable visiting experience and enables the community to gain benefits from their visits at the same time. Residents offer helpful supporting data in decision-making processes due to their local knowledge; therefore, tourism planning and development must utilize resident's potential and encourage local involvement. Opportunities to access markets and grow businesses in communities can be created by doing so, thus offering job opportunities and poverty reduction in rural areas (Lo & Janta, 2020).

CBT has economic impact as it helps diversify the economic activities, revenue generation and provides employment opportunities; environmental as encourages biodiversity conservation and social as directly establish intercommunication between locals and visitors (Ishihara, 2020).

CBT may enhance social sustainability by empowering local communities to manage their own resources, provide meaningful employment, and assist with capacity building and cultural preservation. Environmental benefits include income generation for communities to actively protect their land from degradation and could enhance conservation efforts to attract tourists especially with regards to eco-tourism initiatives. CBT supports local economic development through diversification of employment and tourism destinations; can help to alleviate poverty and reduce migration to cities; respects and encourages equitable participation of local community, is ecologically sustainable and minimizes impact on the environment; conserves and promotes living cultural heritage and welfare; educates visitors about culture and nature; demonstrates good management practices; ensures a quality and safe experience for all of individuals involved ; strengthen community organizations by building knowledge, skills and entrepreneurial capacity and empowering local women (Boronyaket *al*, 2010), (Dangi & Jamal, 2016), (Bhat, 2018), (Bagus *et al*, 2019), (Lee & Jan, 2019).

### **CBT- Sustainable Tourism Development**

“Sustainability,” “sustainable tourism,” and “sustainable development” are all well-established terms that have often been used loosely and interchangeably in the tourism literature (Liu, 2003). Tourism has played an increasingly important role in sustainable development since the 1990s, both globally and in particular countries and regions. Tourism

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<sup>1</sup><https://uniglobeletsgotravel.com/the-incredible-benefits-of-community-based-tourism/>

development is increasingly viewed as an important tool in increasing economic growth, alleviating poverty, and improving food security (Richardson, 2021). Tourism enables communities that are poor in material wealth, but rich in history and cultural heritage, to leverage their unique assets for economic development (Honey & Gilpin, 2009).

According to the UNWTO definition, sustainable tourism is “Tourism that takes full account of its current and future economic, social and environmental impacts, addressing the needs of visitors, the industry, the environment and host communities”<sup>2</sup>. Local communities are an integral part of tourism development. Locals are the main stakeholders in tourism development, as the main beneficiaries of benefits and costs associated with tourism development, but also as part of the tourism experience in meeting visitors. In tourism destination tourists are placing more importance on culture, heritage, natural environment and people (Pride, 2008).

The core of CBT is the development of the community through tourism where its value extends beyond economic development. Although the relationship between community development and tourism in the community has been debated, it has been suggested that community-based tourism brings diverse positive outcomes leading to the sustainable development of the local community (Han *et al*, 2019). CBT is all about sustainable community empowerment. Local people are directly and collectively involved in preparing and providing the tourism experience. They benefit through skills development and improved economic self-sufficiency, and the community can proudly preserve their culture, heritage and local environment. Current travel trends are closely aligned with CBT<sup>3</sup>.

Internationally there are a number of different terms used for very similar activities. Typically Sustainable Tourism, Community Based Tourism, Rural tourism and Eco-tourism have similar objectives. Planning tourism to safeguard a destination’s cultural heritage and enhance its natural heritage while at the same time improving the socio economic welfare of communities (Boronyak *et al*, 2010), (Zielinski *et al*, 2020), (Suansri, 2003).

CBT is sustainable tourism that is run and managed by the community that is being visited by tourists. Because local people are the decision makers for the tourist destinations, profits go directly to the community (Khanal & Babar, 2007). CBT is considered a favourable bottom-up approach that enhances sustainable rural development (Yamashita, 2011). By operating CBT, the community is said to receive a wide variety of benefits, including economic, socio-cultural, and environmental ones (Armstrong, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>UNWTO, Sustainable Development, (UNWTO), <https://www.unwto.org/sustainable-development>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.cbi.eu/market-information/tourism/community-based-tourism/market-potential>

The following attributes are common to CBT operations: aiming to benefit local communities, particularly rural or indigenous people's or people in small towns, contributing to their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their cultural and environmental assets, hosting tourists in the local community, managing a tourism scheme communally, sharing the profits/benefits equitably, using a portion of the profits/resources for community development and/or to maintain and protect a community cultural or natural heritage asset (e.g. conservation), involving communities in tourism planning, on-going decision making, development and operations (Boronyaket *al*, 2010). CBT may be also considered to be part of cultural tourism, because it is about experiencing heritage, landscapes, traditions and lifestyles<sup>4</sup>.

### **Community Based Tourism- Gjirokastra region**

This study is focused on the local community of Gjirokastra region, which is situated in the southern part of Albania and is a rich tourist destination, associated with a variety of cultural and natural attractions, in a small geographical area and is easily accessible to the European tourist markets. Tourism is one of the main sources of income for the region and its support will in turn impact socio economic development (Ktona *et al*, 2022) and tourist expenditure plays a crucial role in the growth of the economy (Boboli & Muça, 2021).

The area is characterised by great cultural wealth. The main attraction of the region is the city of Gjirokastra, as part of Unesco, but not only. Its historical and cultural objects and monuments, archaeological attractions and museums constitute a rich offering for the development of cultural and historical tourism in the district. There are 545 cultural monuments, of which 216 are in the first level and 229 monuments in the second level, in addition to 33 protected areas<sup>5</sup>. Costumes, handicrafts, polyphonic music, and traditional cooking are varied. The area is also known for its wood and stone processing, livestock products and brandy. Handicrafts are numerous and of different types and the working methods handed down from generation to generation. Local costumes are traditionally embellished within tricate embroidery. Carpets and rugs, sweaters, socks, and gloves made from local natural wool are also handcrafted. Gjirokastra lace is famous all over the country, in addition to crochet and embroidery. Men still to this day work with wood and stone<sup>6</sup>. Traditional and regional food are key elements in the promotion of cultural heritage (Muça *et al*, 2022)

There are approximately 106 natural monuments in the district, the most noteworthy being: 1. the nature reserve of Kardhiqi, with an area of 1,800ha, the Fir of Hotovë-Dangëlli

<sup>4</sup>Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Enterprise Handbook

<sup>5</sup>National institute of Cultural Heritage, <http://iktk.gov.al/site/pasuri-kulturore/>, 2020

<sup>6</sup><https://www.visit-gjirokastra.com/> 2023

National Park with an area of 1,200ha, and the Natural Park of Zagoria<sup>7</sup>. In July 2018, the Vjosë Zagori Valley was proposed by the Ministry of Tourism and Environment as one of the 16 priority areas for tourism development because of their high concentration of tourism product<sup>8</sup>. In March 2023, by decision of the Albanian government, Vjosa, the last wild river in Europe is declared a “National Park” with a protection area of 12,727 ha.<sup>9</sup> Gjirokastra has been identified as the region with the largest number of villages included in the “100 villages” programme (AASF 2019).

The region has a favorable geographical position, with the most important area being the Drino valley, where the agricultural space is the fundamental component of its agrarian ecosystem, which directly determines the dynamics of this ecosystem. This agricultural space is presented as a complex of natural and human elements and factors in constant interaction and change (Boboli *et al*, 2023).

Tourism initiatives have increased, with the development of alternative forms of tourism such as cultural, mountain, adventure, religion, historical, educational, festival tourism, among others, but the agrotourism sector has an ever-increasing trend, since it is a sector that is receiving great support from the Albanian government. There are 522 hotel – restaurant business activities in the region, however these activities cannot be considered as independent from the activities of other sectors (farms, commercial activities, services etc.), but as activities which complete the tourist offer of the region and affect the quality of life of country families.

The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, affected almost all sectors of the economy (except technology) and in particular the tourism sector which is one of the main pillars of the economy in Gjirokastra region, which was significantly affected by this pandemic. Unfortunately, this crisis found Gjirokastra exactly at the peak of benefits it was reaping from investing in tourism (in 2019, the number of visitors in Gjirokastra region was 172 629 visitors, 4.5% higher than 2018)<sup>10</sup>, a record figure for the region. In rural tourism businesses the problem was even more significant, because of the inability to sell their tourism products (this product is related to rural experience), but they faced the risk of their survival, as they are family businesses that live mainly from tourism and the small farm economy.

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<sup>7</sup>VKM, Nr 354, Date 2.5.2018 For the Expansion and Return of the “Zagori” Regional Park to Natural Park

<sup>8</sup>Ministry of Tourism and Environment, <https://turizmi.gov.al/propozohen-16-zonat-me-perparesi-neturizem/>

<sup>9</sup>Ministry of Tourism and Environment, <https://turizmi.gov.al/vendimet-e-qeverise-kumbaro-lumi-vjosa-shpallet-park-kombetar/>

<sup>10</sup>Gjirokastra Region Prefecture, Annual Analysis 2019, January 2020, Gjirokastra

However, this situation seems to be recovering. Statistics show an increasing number of visitors to this area. In 2022, there has been an increase in the number of visitors to Gjirokastra Castle by approximately 20% compared to 2019<sup>11</sup>. Meanwhile, for the year 2023, the figures are much more optimistic. In March 2023, there is an increase in the number of visitors to Gjirokastra Castle by 175% and 21% in the Antigonea Archaeological Park, compared to March 2022. There is an increase of 46%, compared to 2022<sup>12</sup>.

Local government policies have played an important role in this change, but the role of Visit Gjirokastra Association as NGO was a key in this effort. VGA aims to promote cultural heritage and tourism in Gjirokastra region. VGA Web has affected to increase the visibility of businesses and consequently to increase sales for businesses members. Especially in the craft businesses, where despite the limited number in the post-covid period, it had a very positive impact. Also, the experiences created especially for them were intertwined in integrated packages. A very positive impact was also on businesses in the rural area, where the number of visitors increased and also the booking of overnights in hostels throughout the region.

As a further step VGA aims at branding products and services offered by all businesses. Destinations can be branded and there have been several explorations of how successful destinations have accrued benefits from the branding process (Day *et al*, 2010).

## DISCUSSIONS

In the context of sustainable development, local communities play a key role in this process. In this paper we argue that this region has opportunities to improve tourist offer, and to turn this rich tourist offer into an integrated tourist product, a product that will directly affect the improvement of the area's community livelihood where the main priorities are the environmental protection and the sustainable tourism development.

From the above analysis, we see that there is an increasing trend regarding the participation of the local community in their involvement in the development of tourism in the region. Their awareness of the benefits brought by the tourism sector has increased. But the host community does not comprise only of residents, but also business owners and government officials. According to (Hunger & Wheelen, 2004) a touristic destination, in order to increase and develop in the new and modern environment, should know the existing resources to attract tourists. It then must identify the tourism capabilities, prioritize them and group them to create a complete service of attracting visitors.

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<sup>11</sup> Bulletin of Tourism, 2022, Ministry of Tourism and Environment

<sup>12</sup> Bulletin of Tourism, Mars 2023, Ministry of Tourism and Environment



CBT refers to tourism activities and services which have been developed by local community members, working together for planning, managing, or implementing different projects and strategies for sustainable tourism development, example using smart tourism. Different authors are using a broader approach to the concept of smart tourism, including in this concept not only the technological dimension, but also the institutional and human one. From this perspective smart tourism will use technology to improve the quality of services, marketing, cooperation of all tourism stakeholders, aiming at the improvement of the quality of life of the local community and sustainable development of a destination (Muça *et al*, 2022). The beneficiaries are communities to develop and manage resources, local government, destination management organisations, NGOs, regional tourism organisations, agencies related to development of tourism. Also, the NGOs contribution to sustainable tourism development can take the form of lobbying or aid supply to the tourism industry bodies so they can develop tourism management plans, or can also contribute towards the formulation of guidelines concerning the visibility of the destinations.

However, regardless the awareness of the community in the region, there are also problems that affect the development of tourism. The lack of tourism knowledge and skills are the basic constraints that limit the ability of the local people to actively participate in the tourism planning and development (Razzaq, et al., 2013). Based on the basis of initiatives and the management of natural and cultural resources, the local community must be the one who serves tourists a tourism product; however, by doing that, it also brings limits of tourism improvement to the local community (Lo & Janta, 2020).

This paper is a description of the development of tourism in the region of Gjirokastra. In fact, there is a general lack in the official data about the tourism sector. The information obtained for this sector is based on empirical and unofficial data that are provided through various contacts or surveys in businesses, tourist operators or guesthouses in rural areas. The purpose of further work is the collection of micro data, which would allow us a complete analysis of the development of tourism in this region.

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