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SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ON SUSTAINABLE MOUNTAIN TOURISM OF GEORGIA

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ABSTRACT

Tourism has a range of impacts on mountain ecosystems, communities and economies. Many of these impacts are negative, but tourism may also generate positive impacts. They can become supportive force for maintaining peace, fostering pride and cultural traditions, creating local jobs, increasing visitor awareness of natural, cultural and historical values and assets. Local communities and businesses support the long-term sustainability of a tourism destination. A decrease in cultural diversity or authenticity and loss of local customs and traditions may bring the destination to the loss of the attractiveness to visitors seeking a unique cultural experience and attractiveness. In one of the mountain regions of Georgia – Svaneti - the economic benefits of tourism are channeled into the local economy of the region i.e. local community benefit from tourism activities and local businesses (accommodation, transport, food and beverages outlets, souvenirs and crafts etc.) contribute to the authentic nature of the particular mountain destination. Cross-cultural awareness, communication between visitors and local people raises the quality of visitor experience and the level of community understanding in support of tourism.

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Our planets diverse ecosystems are permanent but they may become vulnerable to collapse. Biodiversity is built out of three interrelated features: ecosystem diversity, species diversity and genetic diversity. Those three ecosystems are vital for survival of organism on Earth. If just a few components are lost, the well-being of a human may be threatened. Biodiversity safeguards our survival.

Travel to mountain ecosystems is rapidly increasing as a lot of tourists are attracted to the clean air, unique landscapes, scenic beauty culture, history traditions and recreational opportunities. The growth of visitors provides important benefits to local communities and national economies, it also provides potential threat to natural and cultural resources.

Georgia is an authentic destination that offers a combination of cultural, nature and historical/archeological sites together with a variety of attractive traditions.

As a result, in 2019 tourism's gross value added, as a proportion of GDP amounted 8.1%. The additional value added in the tourism industry was mainly driven by accommodation, transport, food objects and travel companies.

Development of cultural tourism and heritage tourism stays one of the most attractive forms of tourism today. Foundations of cultural tourism assets are the cultural heritage of the whole country and the relevant community. Cultural and heritage attractions can bring a lot of money for the community of the region and the whole country.

The regions have a wide range of products based on their history, culture and traditions.

Georgia is famous throughout the world for its dramatic mountainous range. Lots of the famous poems are dedicated to the beauty and richness of these mountains. The Caucasus Mountain region of Svaneti is the home of high mountain peaks, villages, dotted with thousand-year-old defensive towers and a passionate indigenous people known as Svans, bearing an ethnic relationship to their fellow-Georgians, the Svan have been living in Georgia's remote northwest for centuries, creating a language and lifestyle of their own. The Svans with their own language, ancient traditions and crafts, their immense sense of honor have always been a proudly independent people. Many Svans today still live in 25 meter high medieval stone towers of which thousands survive. These towers, some with foundations dating back a millennium are used to protect families in time of war, some still keep ancient treasures brought up to Svaneti hundreds years ago to protect them from invaders. Svaneti museums have world class artifacts and collections of icons, religious manuscripts, gold and silver jewelry. It is also great destination for skiers and snow borders. Svaneti has preserved its original medieval architecture and ancient cultural traditions (folk songs, traditional cuisine/dishes, crafts, etc.)

Local community encourages and supports social and cultural interaction with tourists, as they provide the economic benefits to the local community, create new job opportunities, reduce unemployment. On the contrary, the less revenue that stays with local economy, the less income is available for community. As tourism services are seasonal, the access to the resources and services are greatly limited for local community.

Sustainable activities can be defined as the activity for the indefinite future for three main aspects:

- People - that stands for the socio-cultural sustainability of the local population
- Planet – that concerns the sustainability of the environment
- Profit – that is about the economic sustainability which means to do business in a responsible manner contributing to well-being of the local community over the long term period of time.

This “triple bottom line” means running a business, an organization or a government without destroying natural, cultural or economic resources on which it depends. Business should be operated profitably benefiting natural areas and communities in the way that can enhance all these three aspects.

Providing economic benefits to local people can bring alternative sources of livelihood. It is important to use local suppliers and labor. e.g. employ locals where possible, use local facilities and purchase local services; Purchase, carry and supply locally grown food and beverages; Incorporate stops or stays with other local businesses as part of the tour experience, as a way to both to improve the economic benefits as well as add a valuable and unique element to a tour; Offer sustainable locally made souvenirs for purchase; Participate in skills development program that assist local people to develop tourism and guiding developing skills; Ensure that local companies pay fair wages to local people.

Attractions are usually visited by people for leisure time or holiday. Attractions and activities are closely related to the character of the area where one can identify unique experience such as cooking and tasting traditional food and beverages, music performance, singing, dancing etc.

Sustainable tourism is not a type of tourism. It is a way of organizing any type of tourism development. It is a moral obligation undertaken by all tourism stakeholders towards each other, their local communities and the future generation.

Therefore, tourism – a labor-intensive sector with multiple links across the economic value chain – represents an opportunity to uplift local communities and stimulate growth in rural mountain destinations.

Literature review. Martin F. & Price Dr. (1992) found it questionable whether tourism could be relied on as the basis for the long-term future of mountain communities; they noted much research was required to elucidate the complicated forces involved. According to the same authors (Martin F. & Price Dr., 1992. p.92) tourism has developed rapidly in mountain regions throughout the world, causing substantial economic, social, and environmental changes. While the physical and social environments of the world's mountains are characterized by their great diversity at all scales, comparable patterns of the development and impacts of tourism, and responses to it, have occurred and are taking place. However, tourism is not omnipresent in the world's mountains, and the degree of its development varies significantly over both space and time.

Raymond and Brown (2007) offered spatial analysis to study Victoria, Australia, residents' attitudes toward tourism development based on their proximity to the center of development. They found that on surveys most residents offered conditional support for tourism development regardless

of how far they lived from the center of the development. However, spatial analysis identified place-specific differences in residents' opinions about what types of tourism development would be acceptable or inappropriate (p.520). According to social exchange theory, residents' attitudes toward tourism depend largely on how many tourism dollars can be generated and kept in the community. In addition, those who think they can benefit from tourism development are more likely to support it.

UNWTO suggests that Rural Tourism is "a type of tourism activity in which the visitor's experience is related to a wide range of products generally linked to nature-based activities, agriculture, rural lifestyle / culture, angling and sightseeing. Rural Tourism activities take place in non-urban (rural) areas with the following characteristics: a) low population density, b) landscape and land use dominated by agriculture and forestry and c) traditional social structure and lifestyle". Tourists are attracted to mountain destinations for many reasons, including the climate, clean air, unique landscapes and wildlife, scenic beauty, local culture, history and heritage, and the opportunity to experience snow and participate in snow-based or nature-related activities and sports. Mountain Tourism is a type of "tourism activity which takes place in a defined and limited geographical space such as hills or mountains with distinctive characteristics and attributes that are inherent to a specific landscape, topography, climate, biodiversity (flora and fauna) and local community. It encompasses a broad range of outdoor leisure and sports activities". Rural and mountain tourism have a high potential to stimulate local economic growth and social change because of its complementarity with other economic activities, its contribution to GDP and job creation, and its capacity to promote the dispersal of demand in time (fight seasonality) and along a wider territory (UNWTO).

According to Eunju Woo, Muzaffer Uysal, M. Joseph Sirgy (2018) there is a reciprocal link between tourism development and QOL(Quality of Life) of host communities. The QOL effect is not always as strong and positive, it can be explained by a number of moderator effects. One important moderator is the carrying capacity of the community (the extent to which a community can accommodate large number of tourists with no adverse consequences).

Methodology. In 2019 Number of Accommodation Units in Svaneti (Upper and Lower) amounted – 400 enterprises with Bed Capacity about 20 000 pax. A questionnaire was designed and distributed to local residents involved basically in accommodation sector. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: 1) community perceptions of Svaneti region as a tourism destination; 2) attitudes toward tourism development impacts (economic, social and environmental); and 3) background information (age, gender, business involvement etc.).

There were slight differences in age groups. Though (97%) of respondents stated that Svaneti is already a tourism destination, it is visited by a large number of visitors; Most of the residents stated that tourism should be developed in close partnership with surrounding communities;

The respondents generally had positive attitudes towards the impacts of tourism development. Concerning economic impacts 96.8 % believed that tourism development would provide more jobs for local people, 85.5 % noted that the tourism industry would play a major economic role in the community. Responding to statements about tourism's potential environmental impacts on their community the residents were positive, they believed that tourists would contribute to environmental conservation efforts in the region. Most of them made remarks about the uniqueness of the culture and destination. The respondents' major concern was about effective conservation measures (76.2%).

Conclusions. The popularity of top tourist destinations in today's environment is based on the cleanliness of the environment, its effective conservation measures and the cultural identity. In areas where this list is lacking, there is a clear decline in tourist flows, environmental pollution, loss of cultural identity, declining economic conditions, all of which have a negative impact on tourism development. Taking into consideration the specifics of the community in the management process, tourism can play a positive role, especially in nature conservation and conservation activities. This is due to the fact that the environment with its unique landscapes and unique natural monuments, diversity of flora and fauna, fresh air and spring water make up most of the resources that interest tourists. Tourism can contribute to the preservation of the environment. In this regard, tourism planning and development is of great importance: Archaeological excavations, historical monuments, original architecture, folklore, art, handicrafts, national clothing, traditions and value system, all of which together constitute the culture of a given region. Such cultural heritage attracts tourists. The study showed that residents' satisfaction is the key factor that leads to tourism development success. Therefore it is extremely important for any development strategy to preserve the unique historical, cultural and social identity of the region taking into consideration local communities major concerns about effective conservation measures.

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