Seizing community participation in sustainable development: pueblos Mágicos of Mexico

Helene Balslev Clausen, Szilvia Gyimóthy*

Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University, Denmark

Abstract

Despite ten years of strategic focus on growth through sustainable tourism, few research projects generated understanding of how development policy initiatives contributed to community benefits locally. This article addresses this research gap and explores how the aims of local development and cultural sustainability defined in the Mexican national tourism program Pueblos Mágicos are put into practice. The analysis is focused on how citizenship, local participation and democracy are operationalized and what are the local consequences of this governmental program in the community of Alamos. By following the constitution and decision-making processes in the local Pueblos Mágicos committee, we demonstrate how different groups bargain on behalf of the ‘community’ and how they seize the opportunity to promote different development priorities. In particular, we address the role of a North American migrant community in shaping sustainable tourism development as cultural brokers, social entrepreneurs and mediators of market knowledge. The paper criticizes the notion of homogenous local communities as an instrumental condition of sustainable and participatory development.

1. Introduction

Tourism has been advocated as a tool for socio-economic progress in the Global South for over three decades. Contemporary tourism realities, however, show an entirely different picture: the internationalization of emerging tourism economies brought about neocolonialist structures that exacerbated rather than alleviated inequalities on local levels (Cole and Morgan, 2010). These are manifested in economic leakages, environmental degradation and uneven distribution of benefits (Brown, 1998). In mature and emerging Latin American tourism destinations economic value is typically captured by multinational tour operators, hotel consortia or new transnational elites, while marginalized groups face higher costs of living, exclusion from previous public goods and recreational areas. Regional inequalities between wealthy coastal areas and rural hinterland are further emphasized with foreign investments in luxury tourism resorts in many Latin American countries (Mowforth et al., 2008) and communities have little to say to shape local tourism development strategies and policy processes (Canada et al., 2011).

The turn of the new millennium marks a shift in the appreciation of the relationships between sustainable development and tourism. In order to address structural inequities and reach long-term benefits for local populations, recent national tourism development programs in the South gradually focus on conservation and social measures and increased involvement of marginalized communities (Chok et al., 2007). Such reformed policy intentions are reflected in the Mexican strategic initiative Pueblos Mágicos [Magical Villages], which aims at revitalizing rural and remote areas through cultural tourism. To achieve sustainable development in both economic and cultural terms, the program is designed to be carried out through the involvement of local communities. The initiative is designed along a decentralized structure, mimicking contemporary governance models in the North. It explicitly refers to the UNWTO’s Agenda 21 terminologies (UNWTO 1994) in terms of defining sustainable growth, which aims at complying with all three levels of sustainability (environmental, economic, social). On a more critical note, the emphasis is on the ‘touristification’ of local cultural assets and heritage, which implicitly imposes market preferences and growth logic on sustainable development processes. As such, the program inscribes itself into the hegemonic discourse of sustainable development and

* Corresponding author. Aalborg University, Department of Culture and Global Studies, Campus Copenhagen, A.C. Meyers Vænge 15, 2450 København SV, Denmark. Tel.: +45 99402354.
E-mail address: gyimothy@cgs.aau.dk (S. Gyimóthy).

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jclepro.2015.01.084
0959-6526/© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.
reproduces modernist institutional structures underpinning capitalistic modes of tourism production (Lippert, 2010), rather than striving for deeper social transformations.

There is a wide acknowledgement of these anomalies in the sustainable tourism literature, and several scholars note that the majority of community-based tourism planning initiatives have been economically unsuccessful (Goodwin, 2006; Scheyvens, 2011; Tolkach et al., 2012; Tosun and Timothy, 2003). Still, we know little about how sustainable development and community-based policy initiatives are implemented and become jeopardized on the local level. How are sustainability ideals and objectives translated into action and how are local communities involved and empowered during the unfolding of specific programs? How are international intermediaries and knowledge brokers with insights into tourist generating markets connected to local development? Despite ten years of strategic focus on growth through sustainable tourism, few research projects generated understanding of how development policy initiatives contributed to community benefits locally (Harrison, 2008).

This article departs from the acknowledgement of this research gap and explores how the aims of local development and cultural sustainability are put into practice in the national tourism program Pueblos Mágicos [Magical Villages]. Taking the point of departure in the social construction of reality defined by Schneider and Ingram (1993), we focus on how citizenship, local participation and democracy are defined and implemented in the community of Alamos, Mexico. The analysis is informed by a literature review on the governance of sustainable tourism development. The theoretical underpinnings and research approach are presented in the next sections.

2. Theory

2.1. The social construction of sustainable development

Stewardship or the ethic of responsible planning and management of resources is a pervasive concept within sustainable tourism research (May, 1991). Tourism assets, such as nature-based attractions and cultural heritage are regarded as common possessions to be taken care of for the sake of future generations (UNWTO 1994). The futurity and equity principle assigns particular stewardship roles to public authorities and the international community. Governments and multinational tourism businesses play an important role in educating, raising awareness and promoting appropriate behavior by fostering a more sustainable approach to development. However, there is a real challenge associated with the institutionalization of environmentally responsible practices in a fragmented, neo-liberal tourism industry. Regulatory frameworks ensuring the implementation of community-based and eco-centric projects are potentially at odds with other, pro-growth regional agendas (Saarinen, 2006; Tosun, 2000), especially in a developing country context.

In practice, the holistic approach to sustainability as promoted in Agenda 21 is often translated into priorities and trade-offs between environmental, economic and social priorities. The implementation of sustainability goals is fraught with negotiations between multiple stakeholders on local levels, arising from as diverse interests and views on tourism development held by involved actors (Broad and Spencer, 2008; Carrion, 2000; Saarinen, 2006). This organisation ecology is further complicated by the entry of international corporations and transnational entrepreneurs to domestic markets. As such, tourism has become a political, economic and cultural ordering tool, allowing various groups and institutions (government, civil society, private companies) to legitimise action aiming at creating, altering or reconstructing the history of a region (Velázquez and Clausen, 2012). Consequently, the design of sustainable policies reflects the norms and values of these groups and realized outcomes are conditioned by the relative social positions and power structures among stakeholders (Ingram et al., 2007).

2.2. Engaging the community

A recurring issue is the problematic notion of ‘locally managed’ sustainable action, based on the assumption that enduring success in this field necessitates leadership anchored at local administration levels and the involvement of resident populations. Community-oriented researchers embrace the notion of sustainable stewardship of tourism resources (Holden, 2005; Emery and Flora, 2006), maintaining that citizenship and participatory democracy (as opposed to individually oriented strategies) may be the way forward to stimulate positive social change. Central to the collective view on citizenship are the cultural aspects of belonging to a collective body. By sharing common roots and history, people would be more inclined to enact stewardship of the inherited common good. In case of sustainable citizenship, this would be manifested in active public participation in environmentally/sustainable tourism development processes. The normative (Northern) concept of participatory democracy (as opposed to individually oriented strategies) may be the way forward to stimulate positive social change. As noted by Owen and Videras (2008), participatory decision-making (community mobilization to act in the public sphere) may serve as a way to create engagement and action in areas where actual or perceived benefits of sustainability efforts are low. Jamal and Watt’s (2011) study of a North American mountain community provides an illustration of how climate change pedagogy projects targeted at schoolchildren and neighborhoods increased public awareness and engagement in environmentally sustainable actions. According to Jamal and Watt (ibid.) such community initiative makes evident “the conditions of freedom and plurality, and characteristics of dialogue, rational persuasion, storytelling and remembrance for future generations as well as the potential for the participants to engage further in participatory political action, through being directly involved and better informed in […] sustainability management” (p. 574).

While this appears to be the case in Western and North American societies with a long history of civic engagement, it is questionable how societal structures and cultural norms affect the explicit involvement of particular members of Southern communities who are traditionally marginalized in decision-making processes. The normative (Northern) concept of participatory development is criticized by Tosun (2000) and several scholars demonstrate that dialogue-based processes are not necessarily viable or regarded efficient in other cultural contexts. For instance, Li (2006) questions the assumption that civic participation in decision-making should be a precondition of benefiting local communities. Contemplating on the weak direct involvement of residents in the development of Jiuzhaigou Biosphere Reserve in China, she demonstrates that local participation is delegated to the ‘elite management’ of the biosphere, who are considered to be legitimate, knowledgeable and efficient community representatives by local residents. Given collective land ownership and particular institutional structures prevailing in China, a civic engagement model built on Western principles is perceived inefficient and unnecessary by the members of the community (ibid.). In another cultural context, Yüksel et al. (2005) examine the effects of decentralized tourism governance and power distribution in the Turkish coastal resort of Belek and note that authority transfer is fraught with difficulties in societies where there is little tradition of participatory democracy. Grassroot civic engagement and NGOs “may not form
easily due to repression, due to familial or political networks providing more secure desired outcomes or because of skepticism as to whether these groups will be effective” (ibid., 867). Hence, community engagement is conditioned by socio-culturally embedded notions of authority, control and power, and perceptions of political legitimacy. The empirical findings of Yüksel et al. (2005) suggest that decentralized governance and a wider dispersion of authority may hamper effectiveness and accountability and even lead to new exclusion mechanisms. Hence, the decentralized implementation of development strategies must consider “place-specific circuits of power between the economy, society and the state” (ibid., 882).

One of the most challenging issues for sustainable tourism proponents is that disagreement still exists on exactly what may constitute ‘local involvement’ or ‘participation’. The type, amount, intensity and equity of community participation require closer examination to determine the level of involvement for any project claiming social sustainability. In relation to tourism, the community approach raises the question as to how sustainable citizenship may be performed in ‘liquid destinations’ sustained by a perpetual influx/outflow of seasonal workers, immigrants and visitors. As Dredge and Jamal (2013) aptly demonstrate, the absence of mature and empowered citizenship may be a problematic issue in tourism resorts with extreme population mobilities. Based on an analysis of the Gold Coast, Australia, they contend that notions related to sustainable governance (‘local participation’ and ‘community-based tourism’) may become obsolete in hyper-real destination settings.

2.3. Cultural brokers

Studies addressing local participation in tourism development processes often use the notions of community and citizenship interchangeably, assuming that the members of the community are culturally and legally still rooted — or locked — to one geographical place. Such myopic views hamper the analysis of increasingly mobile societies (Dredge and Jamal, 2013), and may bypass important non-local or itinerant stakeholders. A ‘local’ community focus diverts attention away from the impact of leisure and lifestyle mobilities on development and neglects the role of cultural brokers between tourism generating and receiving areas.

Few studies deal with the relationships between community members and foreign, non-tourism mediators and the impact of this relationship on tourism development. A notable exception is Zorn and Farthing’s (2007) longitudinal ethnography of communitarian tourism development on Taquile Island (Peru). In particular, they demonstrate the role of international non-tourism mediators (volunteers, philanthropists, doctors, scholars and a textile exporter) in shaping Taquile’s particular model of communitarian tourism. Opposed to institutionalized mediators, such as foreign tour operators and transport companies, ‘ad-hoc’ mediators “have no clear-cut mandate to assist with tourism development” (ibid., 674), nor are they commercially involved in tourism. Nevertheless, as relationship and knowledge brokers, they supported Taquileans to develop alliances with the outside world, to learn about foreign markets and to rise a new generation of young entrepreneurs adhering to communitarian development. “Because they were principally foreigners, the mediators enabled the islanders to exercise their agency in the face of a hostile surrounding environment — by jumping local barriers to develop transnational relationships” (ibid., 685). This implies that leapfrogging global-local ties between host and migrant communities (also beyond the scope of tourism) may have a significant impact on how tourism develops in a particular locality.

3. Material and methods

This section presents the research question, approach and data sources, as well as the presentation of the analytical framework, followed by a description of the history of tourism development in Mexico and the Pueblos Mágicos program.

In order to understand contemporary practices and complexity of participatory endeavors for sustainable development in the South, we conducted a longitudinal case study of the implementation of Mexican Pueblos Mágicos program in the community of Alamos. By exploring the place-specific circuits of power and social dynamics characterizing the implementation of specific projects, it is possible to identify the processes and brokers of community-based strategic initiatives. Consequently, this study is guided by the following research questions:

- How is community-based sustainable development framed in strategic documents?
- How is participatory development operationalized on the local level?
- How do resident and mobile actors seize influence in local development processes?

During the case study, a range of data sources were collected, including in-depth qualitative interviews with key stakeholders in Alamos as well as municipality representatives, institutions and NGOs related to the Pueblos Mágicos Program (PMP). Furthermore, a total of 36 households were interviewed to capture resident perceptions and rationales regarding tourism development activities related to Pueblos Mágicos. The qualitative interviews reported here were conducted in 2013; however the researchers have done fieldwork regularly in the region during the last six years. Previous ethnographic fieldwork encompassed participant observation at several PMP meetings at a regional and national level as well as active participation in the community’s daily life and events, so as to reveal formal and informal structures, social distinctions and relationships between the members of the community. During the course of the past six years, a range of secondary sources have been collected, consisting of historical documentation, official statistics, and cultural programs at the municipal, state, and federal levels.

3.1. Research approach and analytical framework

In order to study the consequences of governmental sustainable tourism initiatives for place-specific social dynamics, the social construction of local populations becomes a central research issue. Ingram et al. (2007) proposed the term ‘social construction of problems and issues’ as a tool to analyse how a set of actors in specific situations and at specific times, ascribe meaning to phenomena. In our case, this entails the study of how priorities defined by the Pueblos Mágicos program are reflected in complex interaction processes and translated into action. The social construction approach acknowledges that public policies are instructive goals and means to be implemented by the local administration (Schwandt, 1994; Berger and Luckmann, 1967). This presents three analytical foci. First, who are the actors standing to intervene in the operationalization of the policy? Second, how are conservation goals, authenticity criteria or principles of benefit distribution defined? Who and how collaborates in the concrete construction of a community-based development project, which groups are directly affected and who are intentionally excluded? By regarding policy design as a phenomenon in the becoming (that is, subjected to different views, interests and perspectives), the social construction perspective may reveal how different local actors and power constellations are perceived and stereotyped within specific
social situations (Schneider and Ingram, 1993). Both politicians and social actors seek to benefit from the resources available, by mobilizing a set of action strategies to participate in municipal policy processes. In order to identify the root problems of failed projects and uneven outcomes, it is highly important to understand how decision makers define the problem, prioritize the initiatives and distribute impacts that can emerge from different intervention strategies (Ingram et al. 2007).

Miller and Auyong (1991) propose the existence of several players central to the social construction of local tourism development, which informed the respondent sampling of the current study. Four actor groups were considered, such as: tourists (domestic and foreign), local and foreign tourism service providers (accommodation, travel agencies, airlines, restaurants and other related services), locals (residents, civic organizations, churches, schools, political groups and parties) 4) governments (government at all three levels and various agencies involved, institutions or international companies). As conceptualised by Schneider and Ingram (1993), each of these groups would be affected by specific policy initiatives, being either beneficiaries, contenders, dependents or deviants. Beneficiaries are actors perceived as key players of tourism growth, and are being explicitly targeted and supported in policy. Contenders are individuals or groups of people whose activities may inhibit the implementation of public policies. Dependents are reliant on the successful outcomes of public processes, but not considered as an obstacle for implementation. Finally, the deviants are conceptualised as a potential threat to development processes and as contributors of negative public image (Schneider and Ingram, 1993).

3.2. Sustainable tourism development in Mexico

Mexico is the leading international destination in Latin America, ranking tenth in terms of international tourist arrivals worldwide, with more than 39.4 million visitors in 2013 (SECTUR, 2013). Although Mexico’s international image may be jeopardized due to violence inflicted by drug cartels, this threat has so far not been reflected by tourism statistics. International tourism to Mexico has increased by 2.8% in the first five months of 2013 compared to 2012, and it remains the top destination for Americans traveling abroad. The country’s travel and tourism economy increased its contribution with US$13.3 billion, equaling 13.2% of Mexico’s GDP, growing by 3.8% annually (SECTUR, 2013).

The active involvement of the state in the development of tourism in Mexico is not a new phenomenon. Promoting tourism has been on the federal agenda since the 1920s, and this historical dimension has been extensively studied (cf. Pick et al., 2001; Clancy, 2001; Berger and Wood, 2010). Berger (2006) notes that the early development of tourism in Mexico was closely linked to the country’s relationship with the United States fuelled by a strategic interest in restoring economic and political stability in the aftermath of the Mexican revolution. In the 1940s, the Mexican tourism industry was thoroughly modernized (Bryan, 1936), and state incentives promoting mass tourism exploded in the late 1960s and early 1970s (Pick et al. 2001), as the joy of leisure was established as a legitimate right and Mexico. The hosting of the Olympic Games in 1968 contributed to boosting the country’s position on the global tourism market. Subsequently, national policies by the National Trust Fund for Tourism Development (FONATUR) were devised to transform Mexico into one of the most popular mass tourism destinations in the world. Internationally well-known resorts like Cancún, Acapulco, Cabo San Lucas and Huatulco are the results of these developments (Berger, 2006; Berger and Wood, 2010).

With the economic crisis of 1982 the government had to withdraw its capital investments from tourism. Since then, financing the tourism industry in Mexico has relied on large private investors, both foreign and domestic. In turn, this has polarized access to the benefits of tourism to small entrepreneurs or local communities and environmental and cultural degradation became severe. For example, in Acapulco, regulations on environmental impact were not followed, and beaches reached alarming levels of pollution. Cancún was erected at the cost of irreversible environmental damage and serious social problems such as the establishment of irregular hamlets, without the basic services of water and electricity, where tourism sector workers have settled (Clancy, 2001).

At the beginning of the new millennium, Latin American countries began to focus on strategic tourism growth through cultural heritage and historic assets. Explicitly adopting Agenda 21 guidelines, the Mexican state shifted to a more decentralised approach to exploit opportunities of eco-tourism, adventure tourism and medical tourism for rural development and poverty alleviation (SECTUR, 2006a). In order to regenerate rural and remote areas in Mexico, The Pueblos Mágicos Program (PMP, described in detail in the next section) offers financial subsidies to preserve historical and architectural heritage and improve tourism related products and services (ibid.). According to the OECD, PMP is one of the most successful tourism programs, in terms of revitalizing local cultural traditions and conserving natural landscapes (OECD, 2012).

4. Findings

The present study scrutinizes the practical process of community involvement in one particular Pueblos Mágicos locality (Alamos). By analyzing the interactions between various local groups and the government, the analysis revolves around the impact of existing economic and socio-cultural power relations on the local implementation of the program (Clausen and Velázquez, 2010). Our case study demonstrates that the exploitation of local cultural resources are not only shaped by institutionalized sustainability guidelines (Agenda 21) and market rationales of international tourism, but also represents the interests of a few distinct actors or brokers.

4.1. Framing sustainable development in the Pueblos Mágicos program

This section describes how community-based sustainable development is framed in the federal strategic program Pueblos Mágicos, launched by the Mexican Ministry of Tourism in 2001. The Magical Villages Program was designed to promote the ‘true authentic Mexico’ to tourists, (SECTUR, 2006a) and to boost emergent Mexican destinations with dormant cultural potentials. According to the program’s guidelines, a Magical Village (Pueblo Mágico) is a place (localidad) that possesses symbolic attributes, legends, history, important events, day-to-day life — in other words, MAGIC [uppercase in the original] that emanates from all of its cultural manifestations with great opportunities for tourism (SECTUR, 2006a). Eligibility to participate in the program requires proximity to major tourist hubs, the integration of tourism in local development plans, the commitment to Agenda 21, and a population not exceeding 20,000 inhabitants (SECTUR, 2012; Velarde and Maldonado, 2009). There are a number of formal criteria which has to be fulfilled, which disqualifies most towns and villages from the start. For example, experiencing the ‘real’ Mexico should be sufficiently comfortable. The village has to be situated no further than 200 km or two hours’ driving distance from a consolidated tourist destination (a source market), and the site should be accessible via...
reasonably good roads (SECTUR, 2006b). In the states of Oaxaca and Chiapas in the mountains, the latter clause rules out most villages, despite their cultural and historic assets.

Once a village is selected to participate in the program, it receives multi-level financial support, including federal funding for the modernization of tourism-related infrastructure and businesses such as handicraft shops and restaurants. In principle, the title of magical village is indefinite, although it has to be renewed periodically, and the nominated villages are subject to annual auditing. Since the launch in 2001, 83 towns have been enrolled in this program. Most of them owe their nomination to indigenous origins, colonial legacy, the preservation of traditional organizational principles, or as sites of significant historical events. An important cornerstone of the program is to address the needs and views of the local community by involving them in tourism development projects. Each town nominated in the Pueblos Mágicos program is obliged to constitute a local committee based on local participation as stated in the Agenda 21. Furthermore this local Pueblos Mágicos committee must host at least one annual meeting to inform and discuss projects to be funded by the Pueblos Mágicos program with the community. The city administration (the mayor) does not have a voice in supporting specific projects but is responsible for submitting the proposals to the Mexican government.

Whereas the country’s tourism industry in the past forty years has been dominated by large-scale, purpose-built developments, the Magical Villages Program takes a novel approach in its community-based sustainability intentions. The program defines sustainable development and demonstrates its synergy with the local population with specific reference to cultural heritage and to facilitating local-government interactions. One of the central pillars for integrating sustainability into the program is the obligation for the Magical Villages to involve representatives of residents in locally constituted committees. The idea of sustainability is based and related directly to the Agenda 21, claiming to strive for a balance between tourism and exploitation of natural and cultural resources, closer relationships between hosts and guests, and a more appropriate management and administration of local tourism assets (SECTUR, 2006b). Similarly, a more equal distribution of revenues has been required of governments and stakeholders.

The touristification logic of the Pueblos Mágicos development program must be explicitly addressed. The intentions were to build a funding framework to accentuate ‘authentic Mexican’ elements in selected localities. However, both selection criteria and conservation guidelines are defined along a tourism market rationale; that is, developing communities in the relative vicinity of tourism resorts, which possess attractive (market-viable) cultural and historic assets for potential visitors (Clausen, 2008; Torres and Momsen, 2005; Jacobs, 2001). This implies prioritizing the preferences of tourists as opposed to the well-being of the hosts, which is potentially at odds with the equity principle of responsible tourism.

4.2. Tourism development and cultural commodification in Álamos

Our case study is based in Álamos (state of Sonora), a town of 13,000 inhabitants in the northern Mexican border zone. Álamos is located in the state of Sonora in northern Mexico, 700 km from the U.S. border, 350 km from Hermosillo (the state capital) and 50 km from the largest population centre in the region. Álamos is known for its historic city centre with colonial houses, cobblestone streets, and beautiful gardens, its picturesque landscapes, its cultural heritage and events — most notably an internationally acclaimed festival (Dr. Ortíz Tirado). The historic city centre gives an impression of aesthetic commodification, inhabited and maintained by North American immigrants. The streets in this area are entirely clean, the houses are well-kept with lush gardens framed by bougainvillea and other decorative plants. But the rest of Álamos are far less idyllic. Walking from the city centre towards the Alameda, there is a dry, old riverbed, where the tianguis (an open-air market) is held in the weekends. In the neighbourhoods near the river, the buildings are modest and speckled. The streets are not cobbled nor are they paved. In some parts, garbage is visible near the sewer drains, and there are oil stains and potholes in the roads. In short, this part of Álamos looks a lot like many other poor quarters throughout Mexico.

The last twenty years Álamos has developed into an international tourist destination, mainly thanks to a small North American immigrant community residing in the town. In the late 1950ies a visionary North American tourist, Mr Levant Alcorn fell in love with the more or less abandoned town and invested a considerable amount into reconstructing the city centre and its colonial style houses. He settled down in the town and started inviting North Americans to visit the town. In 2010 he was honoured both by the local Mexican government and the North American migrant community for his contribution to local development. The North American migrants living in Álamos are active in the tourism sector, being owners or managers of local hotels, retailers, cafés, restaurants, guide, handicrafts, real estate agencies, and travel agencies. Álamos is considered to have a mature and highly committed local community, which is reflected in the sheer amount of cultural events, activities for tourists and some very active non-profit organizations. However, when taking a closer look, only members of the transnational community stand behind these activities (Clausen and Velázquez, 2010). The North Americans mobilized indigenous women from the region to come to Álamos and sell their handicraft from small tables just outside their hotels. They have also contributed to strengthen the image of Mexico as traditional, authentic, colonial, and pre-modern, by reinventing traditions such as the ‘Danza del Venado’ (Dance of the Reindeer) (performed for tourists on Sundays), and ‘Las Estudiantinas’, ‘Dia de Muertos’ (Day of the Dead). Except for the Dance of the Reindeer these traditions stem from the Southern part of Mexico but appeal to the tourist imaginary of ‘typical Mexico’.

4.3. Inventorying and negotiating development visions and projects

Álamos was integrated into the Pueblos Mágicos program in 2005 owing to its architectural heritage, picturesque surroundings, traditions and cultural events. The town received 32 million pesos in direct support since its enrolment and the city administration invited the local population to participate in the local Pueblos Mágicos committee. Upon its constitution, the committee counted more than 40 local inhabitants. According to the regulations, the committee also includes a representative from INAH (the National Institute of Anthropology) and CONATUR (Destination Management Organization); neither of which has attended the meetings so far. To strengthen local participation further, the members of the local committee have the possibility to invite people (unofficially) to join a subcommittee and to propose projects to the local committee. As one of the members states: “Technically the board discusses it and then it formally goes to the city administration that passes the town’s projects on to the federal program” (Mexican, 8th of January 2013). However, such a broad representation also brings about a complex administrative infrastructure as well as heated debates about development priorities, adequately illustrating the...
observations of Yüksel et al. (2005) on problematic aspects of participatory democracy.

“... when working together too many people, it is very difficult to reach consensus or agreement, then I realized that the work in the committee was just for ‘decorative purposes’, it doesn't have a specific function other than fulfilling the requirement to get federal funding” (Mexican elite, 12th of January, 2013)

Accordingly, the first dialogue meetings in the local committee concluded with two very different visions for how to generate growth through tourism in Alamos. These views create significant challenges for agreeing on a sustainable development plan, as each vision seemed to be rooted in incompatible social and political understandings of sustainability or how to obtain a common wellbeing for the community. In line with Ingram and Schneider’s (1993) and Yüksel et al.’s (2005) suggestions, the analysis proceeded to unpack the power relations, interests and resources at stake in the decision-making processes of the Alamos PMP committee.

4.4. Local participation bias

The local Pueblos Mágicos committee can be regarded as a platform for different actors to negotiate and position themselves and even find new alliances to further influence and reshape the political scene at a local as well as at a regional level. In Alamos, the explicit tensions in local committee highlighted existing inequalities in the community as well as the local government’s inability to address social problems. The first local committee consisted of five distinct stakeholder groups, entailing representatives of, in Ingram and Schneider’s terms (1993) beneficiaries, contenders and dependents. These are the Mexican elite, the transnational North American group, local Mexicans workers (including labour migrants employed in the mining and cattle industry), Mexicans working in tourism (the majority collaborating with the North American community), and the city administration. In the remainder, we demonstrate how different groups bargain on behalf of the ‘community’ and how they seize the opportunity to promote different development priorities. We argue that the local committee becomes a temporary platform through which community members attempt to secure greater control over the resources provided by the federal tourism program.

4.4.1. Elites consolidating clientelist bonds

The first group of idea generators consists of the local Mexican elite who made their fortunes within mining and the cattle industry during the past centuries. They do not engage in closer relationships or intercultural marriages with the North Americans, but acknowledge their distinct status: “... it isn’t a very large community but it is visible and impressive ... [Our relationships] friendly to some extent but we are very different ... and if you do not speak English they do not speak Spanish.” (Interview, Mexican working in mining industry, 23rd January, 2013). Some members of the Mexican elite are concerned about the interference of the North American community, claiming to have changed the town in cultural, social and economic aspects. Regarding their dominant influence, they fear that North Americans would put forward changes that solely concerns and benefits tourism.

Hence, the elite proposed three major projects to generate growth using tourism as development tool: 1) to improve the water supply system as it is non-existent outside the city centre, 2) to remodel the Alameda and 3) to improve the market place and allow constructions as Elektra and Costco (supermarket chains). Only Mexican residents use these areas whereas the North Americans and the tourists live and spend their time in the city centre. However, as one interviewee notes:

“[We should not] ... opt for a gated community to protect you from the sights and sounds of less well-off neighbours ( ... ) The town has neighbourhoods with houses of various sizes and conditions, ( ... ) reminding us that Mexico still struggles with improving housing conditions.” (Mexican, January, 2013)

These project propositions were directed towards the community’s wellbeing, yet it is important to remember that the elite’s employees live in the areas around the Alameda and market. Furthermore, constructing supermarket chains often reduce prices on everyday merchandise. As contenders (Schneider and Ingram, 1993), the Mexican elites would have a particular interest in improving these livelihoods and (as “political uncles”), strengthening clientelist bonds.

Sustainable development is interpreted here as better living conditions for middle-class Mexican residents in that area. However this may not necessarily comply with Agenda 21 guidelines, result in new jobs or educational possibilities for the marginalized members of the community living in the outskirt of Alamos. The proposals from the Mexican elites were heavily opposed by the North American group, who considered the projects to lack both visions and an understanding of tourists’ needs.

4.4.2. Migrant entrepreneurs with social engagement

The state auditing in 2012 criticized Alamos’ lack of engagement, reflected both in the low volume and narrow scope of submitted projects. The newly elected mayor dissolved the first Pueblos Mágicos committee and constituted a new one by appointing ten new members himself. The central position of the transnational community in local power constellations becomes evident in the second committee; counting only North American representatives for the hotel and restaurant sector.

In contrast with Mexican members of the commission, the North American entrepreneurs suggested expanding the tourist attractions with 1) a remodeling of the cemetery, 2) apply for resources to reinvent the typical Mexican tradition Día de Muertos [Day of the Dead], and 3) to focus on nature-based tourism, promoting the region’s rich fauna and flora. All these suggestions reflect an understanding of sustainability along the lines of Agenda 21; i.e. mobilizing natural and cultural resources to benefit present and future generations equally. This idea of sustainability perceives tourism not only as a tool, but also as the objective of development decisions. Poorer neighborhoods may represent a less valuable asset and an anomaly. The transnational group sees the Mexican community as an indirect hurdle to develop tourism further:

“Haven’t you seen the houses at the entrance [to the Pueblo] ... it looks absolutely horrible when you enter [the Pueblo] but we can’t do anything even though we tried our best because it is a Mexican family and they don’t have the same idea as we [the American community] do ( ... ) all kinds of different houses ... Just take a walk on the other side of the river, then you will see a lot of confusing constructions ( ... ) it doesn’t give a very good impression in general ...” (North American, 7th of January 2013).

The North Americans’ vision is intimately linked to the global imaginaries of authentic Mexico (Clausen and Velázquez, 2010) and seeks to inscribe Alamos in these global processes, by explicitly rejecting more progressive proposals. One of the North Americans expressed dissatisfaction with the supermarket constructions:

“... big buildings with big lights like Elektra are unwanted in Alamos, this means huge changes to the town’s atmosphere [ ... ] all
the plastic signs will spoil the colonial style. People might not be aware of it, but tourists won’t like that and the magic will disappear from the town. You can lose some of that quality that holds on to the magic quality and you have to grow it [... without sacrificing it. People (Mexicans) living here cannot see what is so special about it.” (North American, 7th of January 2013).

As the quotes illustrate, the North American immigrants are not only contenders, but also assume a (superior) arbiter role in defining commodification processes towards pleasant cityscapes and market-viable cultural experiences. Previous fieldwork also revealed that they take vicarious leadership to develop the community, revealed that they take vicarious leadership to develop the Mexican towns: progressive or visionary and caution against malls as in other Mexicans working within tourism see the North American group as the year members and efficacy for the transnational group (as empathic community (secundh and clothes, confecionary, etc.). During the past decades these altruistic pursuits have accumulated distinct legitimacy for the transnational group (as empathic community members and efficient organizers) and Mexicans prefer to ask them for social help than going to the city administration. The social involvement North Americans reconfigured informal power structures, enabling them to negotiate their position in Alamos as a group vis-a-vis the local government and the Mexican community. Even though they do not have citizenship rights or voting power to make their voice heard on the political scene, it does not impede the group from exercise influence in the local PMP committee.

4.4.3. Mexican workers: divided between two rationales

The laymen Mexican members of the local program committee are fragmented. The ones working as tourism entrepreneurs (and hence, both dependents and beneficiaries) are in favor of expanding the array of tourist attractions such as reconstructing the cemetery and reinventing the Mexican tradition Día de los Muertos. However, these people also live in the neighborhoods with sanitary problems and lack of water. Thus, although appreciating the North American group’s engagement in the town’s development, they support the livelihood initiatives.

“...we have a lot of strange traditions ... it is the influence of the Americans ... very nice but they are not from here ... first they (Americans) remove the original and then make new traditions and celebrations ... it is okay but we need to have some basic things in order, for example water” (Mexican tourist guide, 12th of January, 2013)

Individuals without direct benefits from tourism also support the elite’s livelihood improvement proposals, due to deep-rooted clientelist structures and worry about the influence of the migrants: “... the local committee has never worked as expected ...there are too many people that shouldn’t be here ... why are the North Americans in this ... they are only in our town for some time of the year.” (Mexican, head of museum, 13th January, 2013). On the other hand, Mexicans working within tourism see the North American group as progressive or visionary and caution against malls as in other Mexican towns:

“... we would have to look at everything: the culture, the houses and the streets so that Alamos can remain a magical and beautiful town... we are not interested in entering modernity ... People come to see what we have right now [...] the people are not interested to see modern houses and McDonald’s or anything like that, people come for typical Mexican things, its streets, its old, old manor houses ... to taste typical food ... if we do not care, we will lose everything ...” (Mexican, head of museum, 13th January, 2013)

The Cape Town Declaration defined responsible tourism as “Making better places for people to live, and better places for people to visit – in that order.” (Cape Town Declaration 2002, as in Goodwin, 2011; 117). In the case of Alamos, this seems to be a rather controversial affair, where improved livelihood projects may not be aligned with cultural sustainability ideals.

4.4.4. Distrusted local government

The local government (represented by the mayor in the committee) is considered a key facilitator between the state and the locals. Furthermore, the regulations in the Pueblos Mágicos program state that the city administration is only present to secure that locals actually are invited to participate and does not have a vote:

“... it is an honor to be nominated as Pueblos Mágicos. It will provide the town with a lot of resources to construct, remodel and expand our tourism potential this generates employment ... the government as such has a bad reputation but this municipality will provide the best projects with all our attention and the city administration doesn’t have a vote we will just attend with questions and a kind of guide in the process ...” (Mayor, 18th of January, 2013)

However, the bottom-up, participatory development perspective in Alamos seems to remain rhetorical intention, which reverberates similar observations from other scholars (Lippert, 2010; Scheyvens, 2011) criticizing the hegemonic, one-size-fits-all models for community-based sustainable development. The previous mayor was involved in enduring corruption scandals, as he repeatedly favored certain producers and social strata in the community. The local administration’s general disinterest in resolving basic social needs has led to general sentiment of apathy. This has changed when the new mayor was elected in 2012, keen to promote and benefit from the Pueblos Mágicos program — although not necessarily along democratic principles. Instead of letting citizens to elect the members of the second local committee, he changed the constitution process by appointing ten people of his own choice. The ten representatives are all except for one from the tourism sector, which triggered a new hope among several locals: “This actual administration is more sensible and I think the new mayor is more reasonable taking the proposed projects into consideration.” (North American 6th of January 2013).

4.5. The selection process

As demonstrated above, investment priorities put forward by the first two groups were radically different in terms of their visions and intended beneficiaries. Finally, four tourism development projects were endorsed by the local committee; two projects focusing on infrastructure upgrades to benefit the livelihood of the Mexican locals (improving local water supplies and renovating the Alameda), while the other two reflected the envisioned needs of tourists and the migrant minority (remodeling the cemetery and reinventing Día de Muertos). The four projects identified above were passed on to the city administration, however none of the projects were forwarded to the federal program office.

Eventually a whole new project (The Welcome Portal) was submitted to the board of Pueblos Mágicos. The 30 m high portal is placed ten kilometres outside the town and is not directly connected to the tourism activities in Alamos. It is constructed of blocks and decorated with exotic colourful flowers around the two...
pillars and hardly represents the town’s colonial architecture. This project was never presented to the local committee, instead, the city administration decided on their own to secure employment for the mayor’s relatives during the construction of the portal. We do not know how that came about … if there were negotiations with the local committee, I am unaware of it and I am the president (of the local committee) … our role is to act as partners, as messengers, but at some point, transparency no longer exists (between the government and the community).” (President for the local committee, Interview, 18th of January 2013)

The lack of transparency during the process has led to further distrust. The majority of local residents feel excluded (“only those already working in tourism are invited to take part in meetings and planning”), and also convinced about the program committee being unable to mitigate (mis)allocation of the funds. One respondent’s claimed that “people in the city council always do what they want and use public money for their own personal benefit” (Interview Mexican, 19: 10th of January 2013) resonates well the generic sentiment and perception of local government as being corrupt and penetrated by informal power structures.

5. Discussion: the bargaining power of transnational brokers

In recent years, top-down development policies have increasingly focused on being inclusive, which are also reflected in the intentions of the Pueblos Mágicos programme. By creating local committees and require local participation, it was envisaged that a more equitable sharing of benefits and livelihood improvements would be achieved. However, the point of departure for constituting these local committees seems to be entangled in formal and informal power structures, resulting in contested development visions and priorities. The present study reflects well Tosun’s cautionary note on community-based development in the South (Tosun, 2000, 2005), depicting multiple layers of practical problems along participative tourism projects. The conflicting interests between beneficiaries, contenders, dependents and deviants (Schneider and Ingram, 1993) become apparent. Despite the strategic intentions of local community involvement and citizen empowerment stipulated in the Pueblos Mágicos guidelines, the project inventoring and selecting process in Alamos was far from democratic and inclusive. Although members of the local community were provided with a more active role as ‘participants’ in the everyday implementation of conservation measures on the ground, they barely have influence on final decision-making.

The analysis explored the place-specific circuits of power in Alamos and social dynamics of the local PMP committee. In this section we address the particular role and bargaining power of the North American community. Despite still being perceived as ‘aliens’, they have gained significant legitimacy among the locals over the past twenty years (Clausen, 2008; Clausen and Velázquez, 2010), owing to their social entrepreneurship initiatives. As suggested by Goldring (1998), financing local development projects through transnational NGO projects become efficient mechanisms to attain political influence or get their voice heard. The non-profit organization “operate through transnational practices, and intervene in the development of Alamos through an active participation in matters that should be the responsibility of the local government. Our findings demonstrate that the North Americans’ grassroots goodwill practices and non-formalized rights has challenged well-established clientelist power structures in Alamos, and granted influence in local decision making processes. Even though the local committee counts several Mexican members, the North American community is seizing control of the town’s involvement in tourism sector (Clausen and Velázquez, 2010) and they are in the position of imposing their development visions, which do not include the views of those not interested and/or employed in tourism.

This study perceives participation in civic activities for the benefit of the community as dimensions of citizenship practices, which are enacted informally. Accordingly, we must rethink the status and role of migrant and itinerant groups in community development in Latin America. Despite not being formal Mexican citizens (nor having the interest to become one), members of the transnational community are still participating in the development committees, assuming rights and obligations on equal terms with the Mexicans and even seizing community-based decision-making processes. However, this is not yet another example of ‘elite capture’, describing exploitative foreign investments. The civic engagement of the North Americans resonates Zorn and Farthing’s (2007) claim, who suggest that transnational entrepreneurs may also be particularly important accelerators of local tourism development, owing to their valuable knowledge and network resources residing both in North American and Mexican communities.

6. Conclusions

The analysis of local community processes in the wake of federal interventions like the Pueblos Mágicos program suggests that we should be wary of assuming that communities respond in uniform ways as either “for” or “against” local development initiatives. Also, the conflicts in the local committee explicitly illustrate divergent visions for community development and multiple understandings of sustainability. Local communities are neither cohesive objects nor homogeneous instruments of implementing community-based development initiatives. It is therefore necessary to differentiate actor participation or influence in terms of their power networks and positions in various geographical, economic and cultural constellations. Family connections, nationalism, basic infrastructure needs, and perceptions of the Other are all influential reasons for uniting individuals into organized groups. Arguably, the social conditions, traditions and attitudes must be carefully examined and scrutinized before participatory endeavors are undertaken. In particular, we must better understand the emergence of new power structures that cracks up the ‘national’ and the ‘local’ as a container of social processes, opening up new avenues participatory structures. The case visualizes how local power relations and patterns of inequality characterizing relationships with non-local actors and entities (such as the Mexican state and tourist-generating regions) are echoed in sustainable development projects. Conflicting interests and visions showcase paradoxes of local development policies dramatizing local social life so as to evoke modernist paradigms.

The actual impact of transnational entrepreneurs on local tourism development (including knowledge transfer of sustainable practices) remains poorly understood in the context of tourism. Too often, the term ‘locals’ has been used to describe a group of people who live in the same locality, with assumptions made about the homogeneity of community members and the consistency of their likely response to participative initiatives. It would be beneficial to move away from fairly instrumentalist and modernist notions of participation, identifying local citizenship as a central criterion, towards a greater emphasis on mobile (migrant) actors and informal citizenship practices. As repositories of transnational
network resources and distant market knowledge, transnational entrepreneurs bring about valuable partnership potentials for public and private actors alike. The present study suggests that more nuanced approaches are needed to conceptualize ‘liquid’ communities (Dredge and Jamal, 2013) and the role of transnational culture brokers.

References


Goodwin, H., 2006. Measuring and Reporting the Impact of Tourism on Poverty. Cutting Edge research in Tourism — New Directions, Challenges and Applica-


Holden, A., 2005. Achieving a sustainable relationship between common pool re-


Owen, A.L., Videras, J., 2008. Trust, cooperation, and implementation of sustain-


Schneider, A., Ingrahm, H., 1993. Social construction of target Populations: implica-


Secretaría de Turismo (SECTUR), 2013. ¿Es el Acuerdo Nacional por el Turismo? Página de internet de la Sectur. On: www.sectur.gob.mx/es/sect/Que_es_el_Acuerdo_Nacional_por_el_Turismo (retrieved 07/12/13.)


