**Rural Tourism Development through Rural Cooperatives**

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**Abstract:** The concept of rural tourism has become important round the globe at present. It is thought that rural tourism can revitalize the conventional concepts and views on tourism, and bring in a new dimension in the sustainable development of tourism. It has been realized that society based tourism can play a fundamental role in poverty alleviation in countries like Iran. This paper used qualitative approaches to illustrated development of rural tourism though rural cooperatives the study also attempted to highlight the barriers of rural tourism and rural cooperatives in Iran. The study suggests and analyzed how the rural cooperatives influence the development of rural tourism. This research draws from our scientific experience in a variety of disciplines namely; rural cooperatives, tourism development and community development. This article looks at how rural cooperatives can develop the rural tourism in rural area at case study Iran.

**Keywords:** Rural tourism, rural cooperatives,tourism development

**1. Introduction**

World Tourism Organization (WTO) used rural tourism concept for defining that tourism product "that gives to visitors a personalized contact, a taste of physical and human environment of countryside and as far as possible, allow them to participate in the activities, traditions and lifestyles of local people." According to WTO it is considered that take part from rural tourism a wide range of activities like: climbing, riding, adventure tourism, educational travel, sport and health tourism, arts and heritage tourism (Negrusa, A, & Cosma, 2007). Lane (1994) outlines the specific features of rural tourism. First of all it is concentrated in rural areas. Second it is based on small-scale and traditional activities and enterprises, environmental aspects and heritage. Third it is relating to small-scale buildings and settlements and forth it relies on traditional qualities of the countryside and develops slowly under the control of local people. Lastly it reflects the complexity of the rural environment and has several different forms.

Negrusa et al (2007) defines rural tourism as that form of tourism offered by people from rural areas, with accommodation on small-scale and with the implication of important components of their rural activities and customs of life Tourism it appears is developing an elitist bias as broadening of its social base with participation from all sections of the society is clearly not visible. The important role of participatory and community based organizations like cooperatives in promoting tourism has yet to be recognized. As a result, the concepts like "sustainable tourism", "peace through tourism", "poverty reduction through tourism", ‘community tourism’, etc. which can best be implemented through participatory institutions have yet to be popularized in a big way. Rural tourism development has become a top priority of the economic agenda of all the countries. It is not unusual to hear that rural Iran is underdeveloped in text of tourism. Hence this paper analysed the role of rural cooperatives for the tourism development in rural areas.

**2. Rural Tourism**

Any form of tourism that showcases the rural life, art, culture and heritage at rural locations, thereby benefiting the local community economically and socially as well as enabling interaction between the tourists and the locals for a more enriching tourism experience can be termed as rural tourism. Rural tourism is essentially an activity which takes place in the countryside. It is multi-faceted and may entail farm/agricultural tourism, cultural tourism, nature tourism, adventure tourism, and eco-tourism. As against conventional tourism, rural tourism has certain typical characteristics like; it is experience oriented, the locations are sparsely populated, it is predominantly in natural environment, it meshes with seasonality and local events and is based on preservation of culture, heritage and traditions. Rural tourism has many potential benefits for rural areas (Frederick, 1992). Rural tourism can be an important source of jobs for local communities, especially for those that are economically underdeveloped. Because jobs in the tourist industry often do not require advanced training, local residents with few skills can readily work as food servers, retail clerks, and hospitality workers. Tourism can be an important force for developing disadvantaged rural areas. In particular, rural communities with few other options for development may perceive that tourism represents a panacea for growth. While tourism can certainly be an important component of a sound development plan, this is not always the case. Bontron and Lasnier (1997) note that the rural tourism impact varies greatly among rural regions and depends on a host of factors including work force characteristics and seasonality issues.

**3. Methodology**

The research was performed as a qualitative library in which the researcher had to refer to relevant and related sources. Sources that we used to collect needed information about Iran in order to write this article were the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Organization, rural cooperatives, State Planning Organization, official websites of tourism Iran, as well as relevant literature and articles about the tourism. Likewise, we have used a number of articles and official websites of the various world known organizations, such as UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), WTO (World Tourism Organization), UNESCO and WTTC (World Trade and Tourism Council).

**4. Rural Tourism in Iran**

In reviewing the history of rural cooperatives in the Iran the argument is made that most developments are unplanned. The rural cooperatives in Iran in the recent years have diversified themselves into various areas of socio-economic activities. The failure of the government sector and various limitations of the private sector have compelled the policy-makers to pin their faiths on the cooperative system. For certain activities/areas, the success of which is based on the ability of the grassroots institutions to tackle them with their participatory and people-based approach, the cooperatives are considered to have an advantage over other organizations. For example, in Iran the rural cooperatives are considered most effective organizations in the field of rural Agriculture. Similarly, because of their vast network and reach, the rural cooperatives are considered best promoters for rural electrification in India. Rural tourism is often considered an economic alternative for rural areas facing decreasing profits and requiring a second or third economic footing. However, like other tourism activities, rural tourism results in a full range of environmental impacts (Kuo, 2008).

Rural tourism in Iran doesn’t have a long history because of insufficient infrastructure and preparation. Even now it isn’t a popular kind of tourism, especially among the international guests. However it is increasing the amount of people wanting to meet the nature, the rural life, the small towns, the old costumes, the traditions. For investors also, development of rural tourism investment could bring in higher returns on comparatively low investments. Iran definitely has great potential for rural tourism. This is a country where one can find the greatest offer for rural tourism: from a half a day trip till a long stay, from the hotel with the most sophisticated services till the most genuine farmhouse. Hunting, fishing, bird-watching, walking, trekking, climbing, riding a horse or a bike, etc, can be performed as specific or complementary activities. The only problem and difficulty is in attracting the tourists. There is also something unique, exclusive and different in the Iran country side – that is the character of its inhabitants. Kind, welcoming and hospitable people among whom nobody feels as a stranger. Unspoilt nature, varied picturesque landscapes, a thousand-year-old cultural and architectural heritage, a profusion of leisure opportunities and recreation, closeness to the urban centers as well as authentic character and rural charm, all these are the most important factors for development of rural tourism in Iran. However there are some other steps that should be taken, because Iran isn’t ready for welcome rural tourists yet:

* Attractions (for example development of rural tourism around a heritage site)
* Rural infrastructure (accommodation in farms, houses, huts; cuisine, clean water)
* Accessibility (roads, means of transportation) – It should not be too far from railhead or airport, especially it is important for international guests
* Carrying capacity of the destination
* Environmental issues (pollution, eco-fragility, etc.)
* Safety, law and order situation (for both the local population as well as tourists)

There is still more budget needed for rural areas. Rural tourism has some advantages in rural are in Iran, for example it provides employment for villagers and prevents their immigration to cities. Currently young people leave country-sides and go to big cities to study or work. Usually they never come back to their homelands.Some of the reasons for failure of these efforts are as follows:

* the role of the cooperatives sector in this industry is not well defined
* lack of international advertisement
* lack of well-trained human resources

**5. Rural Tourism as a Neglected Field**

Understanding barriers of rural tourism is important when a community is getting organized for involvement in tourism activates. This understanding can help individuals, community and organizations more effectively impact the tourism policy-making process. Further, it is important for government to understand that rural also face barriers that can hinder its progress in responding and recognizing the priorities of local communities in Iran. Overcoming the barriers to tourism development presents a challenge to both communities and government, and will serve to facilitate the policy making process. There are several literatures that directly deal with the barriers of tourism development through local communities particularly in third world countries.

Rural tourism in Iran has several barriers that cannot develop. Roads and accommodation infrastructures were cited as the two main barriers for growing rural tourism in our case study. In the long-term, developing accommodation, sealing the road, and providing other services like cafes and shops are essential to fulfill the tourism potential of Iran, and attract a broader range of visitors to stay in the region overnight. Beside The rural cooperatives in Iran yet have not to recognize the importance of tourism despite the rapid growth of tourism sector in the world. Following are the main barriers:

* Lack of definite data base on the number of cooperatives involved in the field of tourism, inability to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the ones which are present, etc.
* Inability to analyze the changing socio-economic dimensions of tourism sector in Iran, and demarcate the areas in which cooperatives have a strategic advantage over other forms of organizations.
* Lack of policy research in this field which can provide definite indicators for future.
* Inability to strategically link the cooperative sector with the tourism sector in those cities in which tourism is in a boom. For example, in Esfahan and Shiraz, tourism has emerged as a big force. But, the rural cooperative sector has not yet to come up strongly in this field.
* Inability of the cooperatives to extend their areas of operations or activities in the field of tourism.
* Weak advocacy for tourism development is also a big hindrance. Holding of Advocacy conferences by the cooperatives in the area of cooperative tourism can set the ball rolling in a big way and create a conducive atmosphere for tourism promotion.

Bushell & Eagles (2007, p. 154) also states tourism as a phenomenon of affluent contemporary societies is a particularly difficult concept in local communities in developing countries to grasp. In this sense tourism development may be more difficult than other activities. Shortcomings are similar to those local communities, but a few factors tend to be more pronounced among local area:

1. Lack of formal education or illiteracy
2. Lack of foreign language skills
3. Different ways of dealing with hygiene, litter, maintenance of infrastructure and buildings
4. Limited knowledge of food preparation for foreigners, including catering to dietary, nutritional and culinary tastes
5. Lack of decision making and planning skills concerning the possible consequences of tourism, coupled with limited ability to control tourism development, unpredictable political climates, and long-term funding uncertainty (Bushell & Eagles, 2007, p. 154).

As a consequence, community tourism facilities and services may be unacceptable for international tourists. Hence building capacity in local communities is necessary for stakeholders involved in tourism in local communities (Bushell & Eagles, 2007).

However, due to lack of awareness, this is not being done at present. Similarly, lack of development of cooperative literature in the field of cooperative tourism is also a sign of weak advocacy. There is also lack of documentation of few successful models of cooperative tourism in the Region.

**6. Rural cooperatives for rural tourism**

Starting in 1933, the Iranian Cooperative Movement has made rapid strides in all the areas of socio-economic activities. The rural cooperative has worked wonders in Iran After land reform in 1963. Today there are more than 10000 rural cooperative. However their ability of these cooperative is limited and the Iran Government is still didn’t considering rural tourismas one of the development factors for rural area. This paper attempt to outline the concept of rural tourism development in relation to rural cooperatives. Rural cooperatives have been cited as goal in community participation in rural development processes. The importance of rural cooperatives in rural tourism development is evident(Ohiorhenuan & Wunker, 1995).

Aref (2009) in his study recommended establish tourism cooperatives to support the local people for investment in tourism development. According to his findings, the level of organizational capacity in tourism development is weak. Hence establishment of tourism cooperatives in Iran, can boost tourism development. From this analytic perspective, rural cooperatives can be effect on rural tourism development through three major capacity levels ; community, organizational and individual levels (Daniela, 2002). For rural tourism development the organizational level refers to a tourism organization; community context refers to informal groups bounded geographically; and individual context refer to people. In the organizational level, rural cooperatives can contribute to the rural tourism development through empowering the tourism organizational (Daniela, 2002). In the individual level leads to community empowerment in the rural tourism development process through empowerment rural people. The individual level in this process plays out repeatedly, increased individual power toward rural tourism development. In considering the application of rural cooperatives in tourism development, the role of the rural leaders deserves consideration (Aref & Ma’rof, 2009). A leader frequently plays the importance role in these processes. Important goals of community leaders with respect to rural cooperatives in tourism development would include facilitating, encourage participants, encouraging learning, and developing leadership skills in rural area. Figure 1 illustrates a conceptual model for how rural cooperatives can be effect on three levels of community. The figure indicates overall interaction between rural cooperatives and rural tourism development. Three community capacities level have vital role in this process. Through this model rural cooperatives must play an active role in promoting tourism in the rural area through establishing strong networks with the tourism organizations, and fostering collaboration local people in this way.

Rural Cooperatives

Rural Tourism Development

Individual Empowerment

Community Empowerment

Organizational Empowerment

Self help groups

***Figure 1: The relationships of contributions and interactions between rural cooperatives, community development and rural tourism development***

**Conclusion**

The main objective of the present paper is to determine status of the rural tourism in Iran. Rural tourism is considered to be a multi-dimensional activity essential to the local area not only rural areas in Iran, but all the nations of the world. It contributes to the rural development. This paper showed a brief conception of rural tourism and its barriers in the local area of Iran. The main importance approaches which suggested in this study were development of rural cooperatives for rural tourism development. Hence this study can be motivation for futures investigate in rural cooperatives for tourism development in local area in Iran.

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