Tourism in the Himalaya - Mountains of Opportunities in a Changing Climate

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Introduction

The Himalaya has for centuries caught the imagination of travelers. The mountain range is known for its breathtaking natural beauty and is in habited by 210 million people with a uniquely rich cultural diversity. At the same time, it is also one of the poorest regions in the world. This paper argues that tourism is one of the more promising strategies to address these serious poverty concerns, creating innovative livelihood options in the rapidly changing social and environmental context of the mountain area.

Promising innovative livelihood option

South Asia is home to nearly half the world's 969 million poor, with a total number of 446 million people living on less than US$ 1 per day. In absolute terms, this is even more than the number of poor that live in Sub-Saharan Africa (298 million poor living below US$ 1 per day; Ahmed et al. 2007). Poverty is even a more pronounced problem in mountain areas, because of particular mountain 'specifities' such as poor accessibility, fragility, marginality and a relative sparse population (Jodha 1992; 2002). According to recent World Bank development indicators, the majority of the population in the Himalaya lives in poverty (between 47% and 83%), with between 17% and 36% living in absolute poverty (World Bank 2006). This poverty also appears to be a gendered phenomenon. In South Asia alone, more than 75% of mountain women fall below the poverty line (Sherpa 2007).

A full appreciation of the poverty situation in the Himalaya, and the way that tourism can address this situation, requires an understanding of the broader social forces that shape the socio-economic system of the mountains. It has not gone unnoticed that the region is going through a period of tremendous political, social and environmental change, with associated socio-economic implications.

Political changes have redefined the context of the mountain range. Political borders have moved, giving birth to for instance the popular Indian tourism state of Uttarakhand. In other countries, whole new political organization systems have been introduced, such as the democratic system in the mountain Kingdom of Bhutan. The global financial crisis has affected the economies of all the regional member countries, though India and China are still continuing to evolve as economic power blocks despite of the global economic meltdown. Nepal has witnessed an immediate boom in tourist arrivals after the signing of its peace accord, but is struggling to create new business and employment opportunities for local people, including ex-combatants and internally displaced person (IDP) returnees who –if lasting peace and security are to be achieved - must quickly re-integrate into society. Whereas other countries, like Afghanistan, are aiming to rehabilitate destroyed tourism infrastructure and sites as a part of their overall reconstruction process. Naturally, these political developments are changing the socio-economic dynamics of the mountain system, and of the tourism system within.

Within these political boundaries, the mountain system is further affected by wider socio-economic and environmental developments. More than 65% of the 210 million people in the

Himalaya region are facing frequent natural hazards, degradation of resources, malnutrition, or food insecurity. Because economically utilizable resources and livelihood options for additional income generation at the local level are limited, outmigration of the mountain area has become a major livelihood strategy for mountain people, a trend expected to be continued in the next decade (Hoermann and Kollmair 2008). Global trends such as climate change are further stretching the vulnerability of mountain communities, accelerating the already ongoing environmental degradation processes and the decline or disappearance of traditional livelihood options, or making these increasingly unsustainable. Traditional and balanced adaptation mechanisms are losing their efficiency, creating an urgent need for new adaptation and coping mechanisms to manage these unprecedented changes, capitalizing upon the cultural and environmental strengths of the mountain landscape to secure alternative livelihood and survival options for the mountain population (e.g. ICIMOD 2007).

It is argued that tourism is one of the most promising adaptation strategies to these changing conditions, generating much needed resources for the adaptation process, building upon the strengths of the region.

First of all, tourism demand is growing explosively. The substantial growth in worldwide tourism activities clearly marks tourism as one of the most remarkable economic and social phenomena of the past century. The number of international arrivals shows a breathtaking evolution from a mere 25 million international arrivals in 1950 to 842 million in 2006, a more than 30 fold increase in the last 56 years (UNWTO 2007). International tourism receipts reached US$ 680 billion in 2005, making it one of the largest categories of international trade (ibid). It is the fastest growing industry in the world, and the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) predicts that international arrivals will more than double to over 1.5 billion by 2020 (Kruk et al 2007a). Rising standards of living in the developed countries and some parts of Asia, declining long-haul travel costs, increasing holiday entitlements, changing demographics and strong consumer demand for exotic international travel have resulted in significant tourism growth to developing countries. The contribution of tourism to developing economies is huge: tourism accounts for more than two times the cash transfers from rich to poor countries than governments give in aid (Ashley and Mitchell 2005). With the highest and most famous mountain peaks of the world, including Mount Everest and Annapurna (Nepal/Tibet), Kanchenjunga (Nepal/Sikkim), Mt. Kalaish (Nepal/Tibet) and K2 (Pakistan), different climatic zones with unique and rare flora and fauna species and recognized anthropological variety of unique hill and mountain cultures, the tourism potential of the Himalaya is beyond dispute. Yet at the moment, this great potential is underutilized. South Asia is currently attracting less than 1% of the worlds tourism market share (about 8 million international tourists out of the 842 million recorded in 2006; Golam and Mandahar 2008), leaving a gigantic untapped potential for growth. In fact, South Asia is forecasted to record growth rates of over 5% per year, compared to a predicted world average of 4.1% (Kruk et al 2007a), reflecting mainly the growing strengths of Bhutan, China and India.

Secondly, tourism, if developed right – that is to say: with a responsible, pro-poor and equitable approach, has an obvious poverty reduction potential (DFID 1999; Ashley et al 2001; UNWTO 2004; UNESCAP 2003; Hall 2007). Tourism can yield high levels of employment and income for the poor, especially in mountain areas where biodiversity and indigenous cultures have not yet been significantly eroded. Tourism brings relatively powerful consumers to Southern countries, an important market potential for local entrepreneurs and an engine for local sustainable economic development (UNWTO 2002). Recent studies suggest that the tourism industry has a higher multiplier and positive spillover effect than other economic sectors, with one job directly created for every additional 3.5 tourist, and a further 0.8 indirectly created in support sectors (SASEC/ADB 2008). Many mountain regions have seen a strong rise in living standards after

tourism was introduced. Even in the European Alps, where tourism is now one of the major sources of income for many mountain resorts, most mountain communities were poor agricultural settlements before the growth of mountain tourism began in the 18th century (Beniston 2000). Successful examples in the Himalaya include the Solu Khumbu (Mt. Everest) and Annapurna regions of Nepal, Bhutan, and the Tibet Autonomous Region of China, as well as parts of Uttarakhand and Sikkim in India.

Last but not least, it is believed that the mountain specifities that generally inhibit economic growth and development (Jodha 1992, Jodha et al 2002), actually form opportunities for the tourism sector. Mountains are important assets for the tourism industry. With their scenic splendor, colorful mountain cultures and romantic, mystic/spiritual or adventurous connotations mountain areas have an undeniable tourism potential. This allure is reflected in recent trends that show a clear surge in demand for mountain tourism destinations and typical mountain tourism activities such as hiking, camping, mountaineering, rock-climbing, mountain biking, wildlife viewing and other forms of non-consumptive recreation (see also Nepal 2003). After coastal regions, mountain areas are second in global popularity as tourist destinations. They take up an estimated share of 15-20% of the global tourism market (FAO 2005), generating between 100 and 140 billion US$ per year. Mountain areas offer many comparative advantages for tourism. The rich natural beauty and cultural heritage of the mountains can be developed into tourism assets to benefit mountain communities. Being labor intensive and requiring relatively low levels of capital and land investment, it can yield significant benefits to remote and rural mountain areas where traditional livelihoods are declining or disappearing due to environmental degradation and adverse climate change situations, and few alternative development opportunities exist. Furthermore, whereas in agriculture or other traditional industrial activities mountain people often struggle to get their products to the market, tourism delivers the market to the product. In some remote mountain areas, it may even be the only viable option for development (see also East et al 1998; Mountain Agenda 1999; Mountain Forum 1999; Godde et al. 2000; Sharma 2000; Kruk et al 2007a, 2007b).

Tourism is considered one of the most promising adaptation strategies to the rapidly changing conditions of the mountains, generating much needed resources for the adaptation process, building upon the strengths of the region. As an innovative livelihood option, the development of tourism will not only be able to generate socio-economic benefits for the region, but also address wider social and socio-cultural concerns. As a product diversification option, it could, for instance, reduce the wider vulnerability of mountain people, according to some a better measure of well-being than the traditional poverty indicators of income and consumption (e.g. Wood 2003, Thorbecke 2004). Indeed, recent research in Nepal has shown that tourism's potential to decrease the vulnerability of mountain people is significantly greater in mountain areas than in the plains (Shakya 2008). Aside from decreased socio-economic vulnerability, tourism could be applied as a useful tool for both women and men to identify immediate profitable local livelihood opportunities in their area, thereby reducing the pressure to migrate, developing more food security, and at the same time acquiring much needed resources for better protection against global challenges such as climate change and natural hazards. As the tourism sector also has a high record of women's employment – tourism has been recognized as one of the most promising off-farm employment opportunities for women in the mountains (Gurung 2005), and statistics of ILO report a 46% participation of women in the global tourism workforce with figures of 50% and above for more established tourism destinations like Nepal (Sherpa et al 2007) – development of the sector can simultaneously address the gendered poverty concern of the mountain area. Although there are still gender disparities to be addressed in access to and control over resources and benefits of the sector (Sherpa 2006; Sherpa 2007; Upadhaya and Upreti n.d.), case studies in popular tourist destinations in Nepal

so far have indicated positive contributions to mountain women's empowerment processes (e.g. Banskota 1995; Lama 1999; Lama and Sattar 2002, Sherpa et al 2007).

Delivering its promise

In spite of its huge potential, the contribution to the reduction to poverty in the Himalaya has so far been limited (e.g. Rasul and Manandhar 2008). Partly is due to the fact that on a macro-scale the tourism potential and opportunities of the region are still largely unexploited (see above). Foremost, however, it seems that the poor are not made a priority on the tourist agenda of policy makers and tourism developers.

So far, efforts made by various tourism stakeholders in the region have not necessarily benefited the poorest and socially excluded strata of society (e.g. Shah 2000; SNV 2003; Hummel 1994; Nyaupane and Thapa 2004; Kruk and Banskota 2007; Chettri et al 2008). Over a decade of research by ICIMOD into mountain tourism in the Himalaya (e.g. Banskota 1995; Sharma 1995; Banskota and Sharma 1998; Sharma 1998; ICIMOD 1998; Kruk and Banskota 2007; Kruk et al 2007a, 2007b), has revealed some of the major constraints. Although the studies showed a clear difference in scale and type of tourism in the Himalaya, it also identified a number of common issues. In addition to policy failures, a lack of human resource development, weak supply side facilities and management, and a lack of inter-sectoral coordination, the main barrier seemed to be a lack of linkage of tourism with the local production system, resulting in high 'leakages' of tourism-generated income, jeopardizing its local income and employment multiplier potentials. At the same time it was recognized that the scope to diversify tourism by developing new products and sites is potentially high. It was concluded that tourism by itself does not necessarily lead to development, nor generate spontaneous benefits for mountain communities, but that deliberate efforts need to be made to link tourism to the local production system and community development if it is to realize its huge poverty reduction potential – a conclusion that has been echoed in the lessons learned of later development projects as well (such as the Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Programme in Nepal), and that has become a main focus in the recent pro-poor sustainable tourism movement (e.g. Ashley et al 2001, 2006; Goodwin et al 2005-2007; Goodwin 2006, 2008).

It is evident that tourism growth can reduce poverty, but only if additional measures oriented on the poor are taken up. First of all, targeted pro-poor tourism interventions need to be given priority. This can be done through for instance pro-poor sustainable tourism project facilitation (e.g. Kruk et al 2007a and 2007b), or through for instance pro-poor tourism value chain development. Recently, the later has been gaining significance as a strategy to further develop links between tourism and the local production system. This increasing significance is mostly driven by an increasingly widespread felt need to scale up impacts on poverty beyond a few high-input local tourism development projects. Although the application of value chain analysis to the tourism sector is fairly new, preliminary pilots and study results so far suggest that pro-poor value chain development could be an effective tool to foster and further develop the link between communities and the tourism market (FIAS 2006; Mitchell and Le Chi Phuc 2007; Ashley and Mitchel 2008; Mitchell and Faal 2008; SNV 2008; OECD 2008).

Pro-poor value chain analysis can enhance appreciation of how local communities are linked to and economically interdependent on their wider environment, paving the way for concrete recommendations on tourism interventions that would benefit poor and socially excluded in specific. Through careful selection, analysis and development of promising tourism value chains (e.g. specific mountain tourism destinations, mountain treks, holiday packages etc), it is possible to identify options for the poor to enter or participate more or more efficiently in these chains.

This will help mountain people identify and successfully exploit the full range of production, income and employment opportunities within the tourism value chain, so that they can capture a higher share of the so highly desired tourism inflows. Targeted pro-poor tourism value chain interventions often focus on the expansion of the tourism sector as a whole, increasing the size of the famous 'pie', e.g. through increasing tourist arrivals, their length of stay or expenditure per day, attracting higher yield market segments, developing complementary tourism products, spreading the benefits of tourism geographically, or reducing seasonality. Assuming that the proportion of the poor will not decrease in the expansion process, the increased size of the pie is believed to automatically increase market value for the poor. Alternatively, efforts can be geared towards directly strengthening the linkages between tourism and poor people in the local economy. The increase is then not necessarily aimed at increasing the total size of the 'pie' but rather the proportion of the 'pie' by the poor. This can be done, for instance, by expanding the share of the tourism market that benefits the poor (e.g. assisting informal sector porters and mountain guides as an alternative to conventional excursions), upgrading the production capacity of the poor for more added value, or facilitating poor producers to enter the tourism value chain where they were initially not involved (e.g. Mitchell and Faal 2008).

Whatever the instrument chosen, whether project cycle facilitation, value chain development, or other intervention methods, a pro-poor, inclusive strategy - taking into account the changing dynamics of the mountain environment - is essential to realize tourism's potential for mountain development and poverty reduction, especially for the most marginalized in society. Commitment from all tourism stakeholders is needed. The mountain tourism sector is complex, multi-faceted, and embraces a wide variety of stakeholders, varying from public and private sectors, local communities, and tourists, to banks, business associations, accommodation and transport providers, restaurants, retail outlets, journalists, guidebook writers, tour agents et cetera. Coordinated efforts are needed to make it happen. A strategic document in the end, in fact, is just a piece of paper. The delivery of the promise will eventually depend on the active collaboration of all relevant stakeholders in the sector, a link that is currently still weak (e.g. Banskota 1995). Government authorities and the various non-governmental organizations, should –with support of the donor community – need to come forward more strongly to facilitate the link between poor and socially excluded mountain dwellers and the mainstream tourism market, for instance through responsible business development, product diversification, human resource development, and the creation of sustainable market linkages. Pro-poor partnerships with the private sector are thereby essential. Only when the development concerns of the mountains, specifically poverty alleviation and social exclusion of mountain groups, are linked with the industry, will pro-poor tourism interventions become commercially viable and henceforth economically sustainable in the long run.

Furthermore, supportive mountain tourism policy and planning frameworks are needed in order to be effective. This requires a shift in prevailing policy perceptions, which are generally based on conditions of the plains and interests of urban elites, rather than poor mountain communities or the needs of women and socially excluded mountain groups. Traditional commercial tourism practices, still common in the Himalaya, shape policies to ensure that state and private tourism entities based in urban and non-mountain settings, capture tourism benefits by requiring permits and fees levied centrally, group formation and pre-payment of costs, urban supply procurement, and international marketing networks (Campbell 2008). All these mechanisms exclude local community operators. In addition, they do not provide a stake for local communities to encourage them to conserve the rich natural and cultural environments that attract the tourists in the first place (ibid). Alternative policies, based on the specific mountain conditions or 'specifities' and focused on establishing benefits for the poor and socially excluded, are crucial. Case studies have shown that where policies and training have been introduced to support local

communities, such as in the Annapurna Conservation Area in Nepal, or the Yuksum area in Sikkim, India, tourism benefits for the poor have increased substantially (Chettri et al 2005; Campbell 2008).

Conclusion

Tourism could be one of the more promising strategies to address the rampant poverty situation in the Himalaya, based on the region's comparative strengths and advantages. There is undeniable scope to increase income retention from tourism for the poor in the Himalaya by facilitating links between tourism and the local product system. Tourism project facilitation, pro-poor value chain development, or other intervention models, rooted in multi-stakeholder collaboration – specifically with the private sector -, and supported by sound policy frameworks offer avenues to materialize this link. This link will not only address the gendered poverty gap, but also provide much needed resources for the poor to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions of the mountains. Creating immediate profitable local livelihood opportunities in their area will reduce the pressure for mountain people to migrate, or resort to unsustainable development options, and will provide them with the necessary resources to reduce their vulnerability to global challenges such as climate change and natural hazards. An understanding of the changing dynamics in the mountain context, is imperative for the selection of the most promising livelihood opportunities, and identification of the most promising vulnerability-reducing interventions that can be made to capitalize upon these opportunities. New research on the relation between tourism, poverty and global change is therefore imperative.

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