

Briefing Paper: March 2010

Tourism as a Development Strategy in Central America: exploring the impact on women's lives

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Introducing Development

Tourism has been the basis of economic growth and stability for some time in many countries in the world. This has traditionally taken the form of foreign direct investment by the private sector in large-scale projects such as luxury hotels and resorts, or in backpacking/alternative tourism destinations. More recently, however, tourism has been picked up for its 'development' potential by key international institutions such as the World Bank, regional Development Banks and bi-lateral development agencies such as the Department for International Development in the UK. The global institution governing tourism development policy, the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), based in Madrid, has received little attention from researchers and activists, in spite of its growing presence in influencing tourism development policy.ⁱ Indeed, tourism as a development strategy has received scant attention from those interested in global social justice and challenging inequality. Despite a wealth of research into the environmental impact of tourism, studies on the social – particularly gendered – dimensions of tourism development are few and far between.

Tourism

The Central American countries with the longest history of tourism are Costa Rica and Belize, which did not suffer the ravages of political turmoil and violence during the 1980s. These countries have been popular destinations for travellers from the US and Canada for over twenty years, who have been consistently attracted by the natural beauty of the jungles, pristine beaches and cultural experiences on offer. Since the beginning of peace processes in the late 1980s, tourists began to return to the other countries of the region, visiting the main Mayan archaeological sites, colonial era cities and further 'unspoilt' nature reserves. Tourism development has been a strong component of the regional integration project, and indeed was cited by many policy-makers during my research as one of the few things that all countries found it easy to agree on. The 1996 'Declaration of Montelimar' signed by representatives of the seven tourism integration countries (incorporating Belize and Panama) recognises tourism as a force for enhancing Central American global competitiveness, and increasing the diversification of economies.ⁱⁱ

Private sector interests have been entrenched within the Central American tourism integration project from the start. Indeed, it could be argued that the project originated as a response to the pressure of tourism industry actors wanting to invest or expand in the area. A key element of Central American Tourism Integration Secretariat (SITCA)'s policy strategy is the incorporation

of the private sector into public sector decision-making.ⁱⁱⁱ As such, the formation of tourism development policy is heavily influenced by the objectives of the tourism industry, both regional and international, and the interests of these actors are strongly represented in the policy process. In addition to the inclusion of the private sector in policy-making, the interests of large-scale tourism enterprises such as multinational hotel chains are further entrenched within the tourism development project.

Tourism and 'Poverty Reduction'

The growing international focus on tourism as a development strategy – in particular in relation to poverty reduction strategies – has had a significant impact in Central America. In development policy circles across the region, tourism is understood as an activity that fulfils all the criteria of a contemporary development strategy: promoting trade-led growth through the diversification of service sector activities; enhancing the competitiveness of Central America at all levels; and promoting a 'poverty reduction' agenda through job creation and increased participation in market activity. As such, the emergence of tourism as a primary development strategy for Central America can be understood within the context of both the changing political economy of the region and global development strategies more broadly.

The emerging consensus amongst international and national development institutions over the relationship between tourism and poverty reduction can be understood in three main ways: by improving macroeconomic conditions through contributions to economic diversification and balance of payments; by creating jobs in both resorts and small and medium-sized enterprises; and as a facilitator for the spread of entrepreneurial capitalism in developing countries. One of the key policy dimensions of tourism development is the creation of tourism-based microenterprises which will be granted access to the tourism market.^{iv} In other words, it is suggested that through greater access to employment and the development of the microenterprise sector, tourism can significantly improve the lives of a substantial number of people in developing countries and cut the number of people living in poverty. This understanding of tourism and poverty alleviation was

echoed by tourism policy-makers interviewed across Central America.

Background to the Research Programme

The tourism development project in Central America therefore has two key – sometimes conflicting – strands: the promotion of private sector (usually foreign) investment and the achievement of 'poverty reduction' goals. Of concern in this Briefing Paper are the implications of tourism development policy for Central American women. I draw on research carried out in Central America in 2005, 2006 and 2008, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council. This research involved over one hundred interviews with a wide range of actors across the tourism development spectrum. At the institutional level, I interviewed regional and national policy-makers. A second strand of the research was carried out in three tourism development communities; Monteverde, Costa Rica; Placencia, Belize; and Copán, Honduras. In these three communities I interviewed a broad range of people affected by tourism development such as community representatives, business people and women workers. The following is a summary of the key findings of the research in terms of understanding the impact of tourism development on Central American women's lives. In spite of the new-found interest of Central American governments in tourism for 'development', until recently the tourism private sector remained relatively unchecked. As such, research into women's work in the tourism industry is challenging as data are difficult to obtain. However, with a combination of global insights into the tourism industry and interview work in tourism communities, we can piece together some conclusions about the gender dimensions of tourism work in Central America.

Global Trends in Tourism Work

Data collected by the ILO on tourism employment reveal that tourism involves a high proportion of unpaid labour, due to the number of small entrepreneurs and unpaid family members involved in the hotel and restaurant trade. The industry also requires a large pool of temporary labour to be drawn upon in times of high demand, made up of predominantly young and/or female workers.

Other features of the tourism industry include high staff turnover, long working hours, subcontracting, 'flexible' working conditions, the prevalence of 'casual workers' and seasonal variations in employment.^v

As outlined by Kinnaird, Kothari and Hall and Kinnaird and Hall, work in tourism is highly gendered.^{vi} M. Thea Sinclair points to the fact that the fun and escapism enjoyed by tourists depends on the labour provided by workers in the tourism industry. However, these power relations need to be analysed carefully, as there are not only divisions between tourists and workers in terms of income and wealth, but also *between* workers, primarily along gender but also race lines. Such inequalities between workers affect the relative income, status and power of those involved, resulting in a clear segmentation of men's and women's work in tourism, the majority of women's work being concentrated in seasonal, part time and low paid activities such as retail, hospitality and cleaning.^{vii}

Overview of Gendered Labour in Central American Tourism

Despite their relatively small number in Central America, up-scale resorts and large hotels tend to employ a large number of people, and as such have a significant influence on labour patterns. Multinational hotel chains have been criticised as setting the precedent for flexibilised, low-skill labour with little room for mobility and promotion of staff.^{viii} The conclusions of such research will be familiar to those working on labour rights in Central America, and follow similar patterns to studies on employment in *maquilas*. Further concerns about this type of tourism are that it has tended to attract sex tourism and child sex tourism; involved forced displacement of local peoples; and caused devastating environmental damage. However, I am unable to provide further information on these issues in Central America as this kind of 'mass' tourism was not the focus of my research programme.

The vast majority of tourism in Central America takes place at a small-scale level. The average number of rooms per hotel in the region is approximately fifteen, compared to several hundred in the 'mass' tourism projects in Costa Rica. Research has shown that some of the criticisms of labour conditions in large hotels can also be true of

smaller organisations such as 'boutique' hotels employing between twenty and one hundred staff. Likewise in small, 'family-run' enterprises, those employees who make up the main body of the workforce do not tend to see much social mobility in their jobs.^{ix} Reflecting global patterns, the vast majority of employment available for Central American women is in low-skill tasks such as waiting tables, cleaning and cooking. Similarly, the timetables required to serve tourists mean that employees necessarily must be able to tailor their lives to anti-social shifts. Tourism employment in Central America should be understood as characterised by two key features: high levels of informality due to the nature of the industry, and structural features of the Central American labour market in which informality and inequality are embedded.

Examples from Monteverde, Placencia and Copán

In the case study communities, women tend to work as cleaners, cooks, waitresses and receptionists – carrying out traditional reproductive tasks. Findings from the research concur with global patterns in that the majority of women workers in tourism are in flexible, low-paid and low-skill positions with little prospect for advancement or mobility. Tourism employment in Central America is gendered in two key ways: firstly, the type of work required by the industry means that women tend to be carrying out traditional reproductive tasks for payment; and secondly, the flexible and low-paid nature of the work makes it more and more difficult for working women to provide the means for social provisioning in the home and community.

Ethnicity also plays a significant role in the power relations of employment in tourism, particularly in Honduras. In Copán, for example, business owners in the urban area argued that indigenous people are predominantly unemployable in the town's tourism industry. They suggest that indigenous people are 'not ready' to be incorporated as they lack basic skills and education. Where indigenous people do work in tourism – both men and women - it tends to be 'behind the scenes' in cleaning and gardening work. The opportunities for indigenous people to participate in tourism production are therefore predominantly

limited to the microenterprise sector, discussed in more detail below.

Empowerment through work in tourism?

Despite the generally poor conditions in tourism work, such as low-pay, low-skill and flexibility, the women workers interviewed in all three communities in general viewed their work extremely positively. They argued that it was a much better life for women than alternative sources of paid work, such as agricultural work in the dairy or citrus fruit industry. Young female workers in particular talked about how their friends worked in the tourism industry in a variety of jobs and how in general it was perceived to be an excellent way to make a living. One of the key positives was the opportunity to meet a wide range of people and gain more personal confidence through a variety of social interactions. In addition to the economic independence offered by tourism employment, the work in itself was generally perceived to be challenging, due to the need to develop multi-cultural communication skills and learn about the tourism industry.

Despite the widely held perception that tourism offers women opportunities for a better, richer life, the most rewarding positions in tourism in terms of earnings and possibilities for cultural exchange are almost exclusively filled by men, and often men from outside the community. The 'best' jobs in tourism are considered by most respondents in all three communities to be an official guide in a Reserve in Monteverde; a guide at the archaeological site in Copán; a guide in one of the many adventure companies (all three communities); or a 'divemaster' or diving instructor in Placencia. Working as a tour guide, dive instructor or dive master is by far the most lucrative job in the tourism industry across Central America. However, out of about one hundred and fifty registered guides in Placencia, only three are women. Likewise in Monteverde, only three of over sixty qualified guides in the Reserves are women, and one of these is from the US. Investigating the reason for these strikingly low numbers led to stories of the kinds of challenges women have faced when wanting to become tour guides. In Placencia, women told of how men refused to take them seriously because they didn't believe they could understand the water like a man. Even after ten years in the profession, one woman spoke of how she is still constantly

challenged on her decisions by her male employees. Other women told of how they were expected to make drinks and food for their male colleagues, despite doing a full day's work. Experiences like these have put many women off making the effort to train to undertake diving and tour guide training.

Management and Ownership of the Tourism Industry

Looking at this area reveals further inequality, not only in terms of gender but also of class, ethnicity and nationality. Particularly in large resorts, the most senior management posts tend to be filled almost exclusively by foreigners and expatriates from the US, Canada and Western Europe. Where local people are employed as middle-level managers, the majority tend to be middle-class men of the majority ethnic group, often educated outside of the country. Naturally, there are exceptional cases whereby local women have risen successfully to management positions, but the challenges of this are outlined in the preceding argument.

In terms of ownership of the tourism industry, in all three case studies the most successful tourism enterprises are owned by foreigners and expatriates, again from North America and Western Europe. The larger and more upscale establishments tend not to be owned by locals, or at least involve some kind of local-foreign partnership, whether through marriage or other arrangements. Locally owned businesses tend to be much smaller scale and less conspicuously tailored to specific tourist tastes, and as such are often less successful. These are usually run by women, giving the impression that women own the business, but the titles to small establishments are rarely registered in the woman's name, more often in that of her husband or other male family member. Thus, despite superficial impressions that the tourism industry in Central America is run by local women running small businesses, in reality ownership patterns tend to be structured along gendered, class, ethnic and national lines.

Women workers overwhelmingly expressed the desire to own their own business and perceived that this would contribute to their sense of independence. The main barrier to this appears to be property ownership, demonstrating the class divisions between women in tourism communities. Those few

(usually middle-class) women with property in the communities have been able to set up small businesses, despite resistance from men in many instances. On the whole, women's businesses in tourism tend to be domestic-based and centred on traditional activities such as cooking, handicrafts or hospitality. This pattern is slowly changing in Placencia as women are beginning to open bars, nightclubs and internet cafes and diversifying away from more traditional activities. Overall, however, the management and ownership of the tourism industry is highly restricted in terms of the opportunities available to women, and is further structured around established hierarchies of ethnicity and class in Central America.

Microenterprise and tourism development

One of the features of economic restructuring in Central America has been the growth of the microenterprise sector. What is particularly interesting about tourism is the number of related activities it generates. A wealth of 'tourism-related services' and 'secondary services' have sprung up in an informal manner across the case study communities. The most prolific of these has been handicraft – or *artesanía* – production and sales. In Monteverde, the women's cooperative CASEM produces clothing and crafts for sale to tourists in the area. This organisation involves a large number of women and allows them to earn some income from *artesanía* work carried out in their homes. In Placencia, this sector has tended to be characterised by very high levels of informality, with indigenous women travelling to the resort to sell their *artesanía* either for sale in gift shops or illegally on the pavement.

In order to explore the gender politics of the tourism microenterprise sector, I would like to expand briefly on a World Bank project in Copán, which aimed to 'integrate marginalised peoples into the process of tourism development'. I have written elsewhere about this in more detail but the key conclusions of my findings are worth including here. In its stated objectives the Regional Development in the Copán Valley project specifically aimed to channel funding to allow indigenous women the opportunities to set up businesses directed towards the tourism industry. The project provided seed

capital to groups in the rural Maya Chortí villages surrounding the town of Copán.

Despite the fact that the project was clearly committed to 'gender', the vague and contradictory ways in which this was interpreted by project workers and trainers meant that the barriers faced by indigenous women in becoming successful entrepreneurs were not taken into serious consideration. However, the local indigenous women's groups – represented by the National Indigenous Maya Chortí Council of Honduras (CONMICHH) felt that they were being somewhat manipulated and controlled by the World Bank project. They were only encouraged to make certain types of products and were required to present their work in a certain way. As a result, many of the women's tourism microenterprises closed down or were struggling. In contrast, many successful businesses had been set up through the World Bank funding, but these overwhelmingly tended to be run by men or by middle-class women from the urban area of Copán. At the time of writing, a specialist gender consultant from the Japanese International Cooperation Agency was being brought in to work with these women's groups to get their businesses going again. However, the outcomes of the project are a cautionary tale for tourism development projects which expect that indigenous women will somehow be able to run thriving businesses in a highly competitive global industry without understanding of the specific barriers they face and an overt *empowerment* dimension to the project rationale and operation.

Conclusions

In all three communities, women talked about how they had been lacking in confidence before starting work in tourism, and how the interactions with women and men from diverse social backgrounds had helped to expand their social horizons and changed the way they thought about the world. This is a dominant theme in research on women's work in global production chains. However, arguably tourism offers a deeper interaction with other cultures than that offered by factory work, as workers are forced to interact face-to-face with global consumers both at work and in their community. Many of the women interviewed perceived that they had gained a level of

autonomy through incorporation into the tourism workforce.

However, labour patterns in tourism communities remain profoundly unequal in terms of gender, ethnicity, class and nationality. While personal gains have been made by some women in the areas of economic independence, tourism remains a highly male-dominated industry. The best jobs in employment in tourism such as guiding and diving tend to be held by local men in all three communities, with some exceptional women breaking the mould. Interrogating management and ownership of the industry reveals an even more clearly stratified picture, with businesses often controlled by men (and women) from the US with expatriate status. As such, local women tend to be locked into low-paid, low-skill jobs which demand increasing time flexibility and a 'service' mentality. Due to the nature of the labour required – in general menial and tedious – there is little prospect for the majority of women to achieve promotion and social mobility through this work. Furthermore, work for indigenous women is even more limited, as barriers such as illiteracy and lack of business experience create significant barriers to benefitting from tourism. While the process of tourism development may have offered opportunities for some, it has done little to redress long-standing inequalities based around gender, ethnicity and nationality.

Recommendations and future research

These findings form a small part of an ongoing inquiry into the gender dimensions of tourism as a development strategy. There is some hope that these issues are being picked up at the global level, as the World Tourism Organisation has recently set up a Women and Tourism Taskforce to deal with some of these questions. However, further research covering more countries in Central America and following up on established tourism development projects would allow more of an insight into the changes taking place through tourism. I would be interested to make links with people working with alternative understandings of tourism development which involve a bottom-up rather than a top-down approach, and from projects which start from the goal of women's empowerment. Overall, I see that tourism has the potential to offer new opportunities and open doors for Central American women. However, the desire to challenge unequal power relations needs to be embedded in policy. Without this, it seems that unfortunately the benefits of tourism will continue to be enjoyed by the few and it will remain unable to be the catalyst for poverty reduction and human development that governments and international organisations assume it to be.

ⁱ Ferguson, Lucy (2007) 'GLOBAL MONITOR: The UN World Tourism Organisation', *New Political Economy* 12(4)

ⁱⁱ SCSICA (1996) 'Declaración de Montelimar II', XVIII Reunion de Presidentes Centroamericanos, <http://www.sgsica.org/turismo/somos/doc/montelimar.pdf>
(SGSICA 1996)

ⁱⁱⁱ SGSICA (2002) 'Declaración de San José', XXII Cumbre de Jefes de Estado y de Gobierno de Centroamerica, <http://www.sgsica.org/turismo/somos/doc/decsanjose.pdf>; FODESTUR (2003) 'Iniciativa Centroamérica Verde: Marco Conceptual para la Creación de una Inicativa Regional de Ecoturismo', FODESTUR, CBM, May 2003, accessed via <http://www.fodestur.org.ni/Espanol/Indexespanol.htm>

^{iv} UNWTO (2002) *Tourism and Poverty Alleviation*, UNWTO: Madrid

^v ILO (2001) 'Human resources development, employment and globalization in the hotel, catering and tourism sector', *Report for discussion at the Tripartite Meeting on the Human Resources Development*,

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^{vi} Kinnaird, Vivian, Uma Kothari Uma and Derek Hall (1994) 'Tourism: gender perspectives', in Vivian Kinnaird and Derek Hall (eds.) *Tourism: A Gender Analysis*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons; Kinnaird, Vivian and Derek Hall (1996) 'Understanding tourism processes: a gender-aware framework', *Tourism Management* 17(2): 96-102

^{vii} Sinclair, M. Thea (1997) 'Issues and theories of gender and work in tourism', in M. Thea Sinclair (ed.) *Gender, Work and Tourism*, London: Routledge

^{viii} ILO 2001

^{ix} Sinclair, M. Thea (1997) 'Gendered work in tourism: Comparative perspectives', in M. Thea Sinclair (ed.) *Gender, Work and Tourism*, London: Routledge