

Exploring the Poverty Reduction Potential of Social Marketing in Tourism Development

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Although social marketing has been demonstrated to be an effective tool of behavior change in a variety of contexts, its poverty reduction potential in tourism development has captured limited research attention. This paper explores the potential contribution of social marketing to tourism-related poverty alleviation in Sapa, Vietnam. It does so by creating an understanding of how local residents perceive poverty, then exploring whether social marketing could be a potential solution in the case of Sapa. Through participant observations and semi-structured interviews, this study reveals that local people perceive poverty as a lack of rice and/or income and ascribe it to both internal and external factors. Local women often follow tourists to sell handicrafts, causing discomfort for tourists and driving them away from certain destinations. Insufficient capital and farming land are also identified as a critical barrier to poverty reduction. This study argues that by understanding the poor people's perspectives on poverty, we can identify meaningful approaches to poverty alleviation. Thereby, social marketing can be one of the tools to bring the marginalized voice of poor people to the attention of decision-makers.

Keywords: Behavior Change; Poverty Alleviation; Social Marketing; Sustainable Tourism; Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

Social marketing is the use of marketing methods to bring about voluntary behavioral change in a target audience in order to achieve a public good. Although perhaps most widely recognized in public health, since the term was first used by Kotler and Zaltman (1971), its applicability has been explored in areas such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, nutrition, physical activity, substance abuse, tobacco, recycling, consumption reduction, and environmental conservation (Andreasen, 2002, 2006; Hastings, 2007; Lee & Miller, 2012; McKenzie-Mohr, Schultz, Lee, & Kotler, 2012; Truong, 2014; Truong, Garry, & Hall, 2014). Recent debates have highlighted the need for the field to embrace a wider range of areas (Truong, Dang, Hall, & Dong, 2015), including a growing interest in social marketing in tourism (Hall, 2014, 2016; Musgrave & Henderson, 2015; Truong & Hall, 2013, 2015). Nevertheless, despite the small but significant engagement of marketing researchers with development studies and poverty alleviation issues (Kilbourne, 2004; Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, & Mittelstaedt, 2006), little research has investigated the potential contribution of social marketing to poverty alleviation in tourism development (Hall, 2014; Truong, 2015; Truong & Hall, 2013; Truong,

Hall, & Garry, 2014). This paper examines the poverty reduction potential of social marketing in tourism development, taking the town of Sapa, Vietnam, a destination with a substantial level of poverty (Sapa District People's Committee [SPC], 2009), as a case study. By examining how residents understand the causes of poverty, this paper suggests that the views of poor people need to be better considered in using tourism as a means of poverty alleviation. They are the ones, who, from a social marketing perspective, are the target audience for agency interventions, which ultimately enable more appropriate approaches to poverty alleviation. The article first reviews the relevant literature on social marketing to create an understanding of the concept. Next, it offers a brief description of the case study area and methods before presenting the main findings. The paper then suggests potential social marketing interventions and their implications before concluding.

SOCIAL MARKETING AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

Marketing is usually perceived as vital for firm or place based promotion in tourism, rather than as a means to alleviate poverty. However, its domain has long-since broadened from its economic focus. Kotler and Levy (1969) influentially suggested that the marketing concept conveys two different meanings. First, as the received view of marketing, it is associated with selling, distributing, influencing, and persuading. Secondly, and more pertinently for the present paper, marketing is connected to serving and satisfying people's needs and enriching people's lives through better promotion of arts, cultural, educational and health services, and effective natural resource utilization. Marketing is therefore inherently concerned with non-business interests and assisting organizations and communities in satisfying societal needs.

Although it has seen only limited recognition in the wider development literature (e.g. Desai & Potter, 2008), the relationship between marketing and development has been examined in a number of studies (Duhaima, McTavish, & Ross, 1985; Hosley & Wee, 1988; Kilbourne, 2004). There are two main perspectives on the role of marketing in development. The first one focuses on economic development (Klein, 1985), especially distribution channels. The second one, which forms the focus of the present paper, is the long recognized role of marketing in linking social and economic goals, especially with respect to poverty reduction (Lavidge, 1970; Lazer, 1996).

Over 50 years ago, Lavidge (1970) argued that marketing had more roles than only facilitating consumer desire, including facilitating the drive for social justice by, for instance, discouraging harmful activities; and helping counter or mitigate the negative consequences of unsustainable social and environmental practices (Hall, 2016). Marketing is concerned with the struggle of poor people for subsistence – because it is impossible to satisfy people's other needs if they suffer from hunger and starvation – and can be used to promote social and cultural services to enable people to develop their potential. Finally, it encourages the adoption of new behaviors and approaches to protect and improve well-being at *micro* (individual), *meso* (community) and *macro* (society) levels (Hall, 2013; Truong & Hall, 2013).

The exchanges on which marketing is focused are an essential *social* activity that go beyond monetary exchange (Bagozzi, 1975). Therefore, it is inappropriate to solely define marketing in terms of the economic ends of buying, selling, and distributing

goods and services (Lazer & Kelley, 1973). Although commercial and social marketing have developed parallel to each other (Andreasen, 2012), examples of public good initiatives that marketing contributes to include: institutional change (Savitt, 1988), conservation (Hall, 2014; Truong, Willemsen, Dang, Nguyen, & Hall, 2016), poverty reduction (Lavidge, 1970; Lazer, 1996), improved health behaviors (Hastings, 2007), anti-corruption (Hosley & Wee, 1988), sustainable behaviors (McKenzie-Mohr, 1994, 2011; Musgrave & Henderson, 2015), and quality-of-life and well-being (Andreasen, 2006; Ger, 1992).

Research suggests that since the late 1960s elements of social marketing have been used in public health initiatives and interventions in developing countries (Hastings, 2007; MacFadyen, Stead, & Hastings, 1999; Truong, 2014), and have helped promote a range of programs, including distributing contraceptives and treated mosquito nets to at-risk people, as well as targeting a range of HIV/AIDS and sanitation programs. Such programs often positively changed the behavior of the target audience, which was important for improving living conditions and community development, and although not specifically aimed at poverty alleviation they positively affected the poverty situation of the target market (Kotler & Lee, 2009). For example, social marketing programs aimed at family planning were implemented in India, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, where contraceptives were offered at a low price and education and mass communication components were developed to encourage local people to reduce birth rates as a means to alleviate poverty (MacFadyen, 1999).

Other programs also utilized social marketing techniques although they did not label themselves in social marketing terms. One of the best known examples is the Grameen Bank's adoption of a marketing approach to poverty alleviation in Bangladesh where microloans were provided to the bottom 25% lowest income earners of the population, consisting mainly of women (Alwitt, 1995; Yunus, 2007). A marketing mix was used including target segmentation, product development, positioning, relationship marketing, and word-of-mouth communication (Dholakia & Dholakia, 2001). Although loans did not guarantee success, it did contribute to poverty-escaping behavior given that local households gained income from developing their own micro businesses (Yunus, 2007). At the *upstream* level (institutional change), the Bank urged policy-makers to enlarge the narrow profit maximization approach to achieve social benefits (and still contribute to profits). Although not always successful in lifting people out of poverty (Karnani, 2007), the Grameen Bank experience has influenced development agencies and financial institutions to adopt an approach that is influenced by social marketing and target audience oriented (Koku, 2009; Lee & Miller, 2012).

A key element that social marketing brings to poverty alleviation strategies is the need to understand the target audience in order to increase the likelihood of successful behavioral change by appropriately shaping the intervention. A social marketing approach is different from pro-poor tourism (PPT) or other development initiatives because of its much stronger focus on the targeting and design of interventions to specific audiences and helping to articulate the voice of the poor (Annis, 1991; Rangan & McCaffrey, 2004). Poor people are often excluded from the planning stages of social and economic projects that are meant to benefit them, while donor's needs tend to take precedence (Annis, 1991; Rangan & McCaffrey, 2004; Truong et al., 2014).

Therefore, the adoption of social marketing practices can (1) help empower the poor by incorporating their voice in the early stage of a project and (2) improve the likelihood of the success of any policy intervention by ensuring that the intervention appropriately fits the needs and attributes of the targeted group (the audience or segment in social marketing terms). Six criteria also act as benchmarks for social marketing interventions (Andreasen, 2002; Truong & Hall, 2013):

- Behavior change goal(s): Programs consider behavioral change as an objective and a primary outcome indicator;
- Audience research and segmentation: Programs are designed based on understanding of audience needs and wants. Formative research is conducted to achieve this target. Program interventions are pre-tested. The audience is divided into homogenous segments;
- Social marketing mix: Programs use the set of four Ps in the traditional marketing mix (Product, Price, Place, Promotion). Other Ps may include People and Policy;
- Exchange: Something of value is offered to the audience to motivate behavioral change. It may be tangible (e.g. financial incentives) or intangible (e.g. emotional satisfaction);
- Upstream targeting: Programs seek to influence other people relating to the target audience (e.g. local authorities, professional organizations, policy-makers); and
- Competing behaviors: Competing behaviors are considered by program interventions. They may be internal (e.g. the target audience's current behavior) and/or external (e.g. ineffective policies). Strategies are developed to eliminate or minimize these factors.

Arguably one of the most distinguishing features of a social marketing approach is the attention given to market segmentation and target audience research so that the social marketing mix is clearly designed to provide a clear and workable exchange proposition that will potentially succeed with the audience (Hall, 2014). However, even though many tourism projects, including with respect to PPT, utilize marketing principles in either whole or part to achieve social and behavioral change (Truong & Hall, 2013), surprisingly the explicit connection between tourism and social marketing has been little addressed (Hall, 2014; Truong & Hall, 2013, 2015; Truong et al., 2014).

While there is increased interest in the role and responsibility of national governments as well as international development agencies in poverty alleviation (Hill & Adrangi, 1999), Kotler, Roberto, and Leisner (2006) argue that poverty remains in part because some people tend to maintain "poverty-staying behavior" (p. 235). For example, a survey of poor people in Pakistan revealed that in attempting to engage in income-generating activities the local poor tend to choose a low-risk and low-income option rather than a higher-risk but higher-income one. The low-risk and low-income activity is considered a form of poverty-staying behavior (Kotler et al., 2006, p. 235). Expanding on this, Kotler and Lee (2009) place poverty at the center of social marketing efforts and adopt a conventional marketing approach to poverty al-

leviation, from situation analysis, target segmentation, goals and objectives setting to implementation, evaluation and monitoring. Thereby, various dimensions of poverty (e.g. socio-economic, environmental) are examined, also including health, education, and family planning issues. Most importantly, Kotler and Lee (2009) regard poor people as needing to be active participants in identifying and solving their own problems. While this paper does not share the notion that individuals are fully responsible for their own condition, instead emphasizing the importance of structural and institutional reasons for poverty, it does support the notion that poor people should be active participants in the development and implementation of poverty reduction interventions, including in tourism (Hall, 2014). In order to do so, it is important to first of all understand how residents perceive the causes of poverty and see whether social marketing could be a potential contributor to poverty alleviation. The next section describes the case study area for this research.

CASE STUDY AREA

Covering an area of 68,329 ha, Sapa is located in the mountainous province of Lao Cai and is about 400 km from Vietnam's capital of Hanoi. Administratively, Sapa consists of Sapa town and 17 communes with a total population of 53,549 inhabitants (General Statistics Office of Vietnam [GSOV], 2010). Each commune has a people's committee and a people's council that control several villages. Besides the national majority of Kinh (Vietnamese) people that account for 17.9% of population, Sapa is home to several ethnic minority groups: H'Mong (51.7%), Red Dzaio (23%), Tay (4.7%), Dzay (1.4%), Xa Pho (1.1%), and other ethnic groups (0.2%) (SPC, 2009).

The regional economy has undergone substantial change, with the contribution of agro-forestry and fishing to Sapa's economy decreasing from 44.68% in 2000 to 29.83% in 2010, while that of tourism and services increased from 48.86% to 58.68% in the same period. Although Sapa's household poverty rate decreased from 48.7% (2005) to 26.91% (2009), the national poverty rate is 9.6%, where poor people are defined as those who earn less than VND (Vietnamese Dong) 500,000 (USD 23.8) and 400,000 (USD 19) per month in urban and rural areas, respectively (GSOV, 2012).

Tourism started in Sapa in the 1900s when the French developed the area as a hill station (Michaud & Turner, 2006). A sanatorium was completed in 1913 to house military officers and foreigners and a tourist office was opened in 1917. Privately owned villas and hotels were built in Sapa between 1920 and 1940. During the French War (1945-1954), the area was severely damaged (Vu & Sato, 2010) and in 1990, a railway network was built to connect Sapa with Hanoi and other provinces. In 2012, Sapa attracted 610,000 tourist arrivals, a tenfold increase as compared to 60,000 tourist arrivals in 2002 (Truong et al., 2014).

Since 1993, when Sapa was reopened to tourists, tourism has been an important sector in the local economy and a means of poverty alleviation (SPC, 2009). It has attracted substantial funding from international NGOs and development agencies (Truong & Hall, 2013). Different approaches have been adopted in development projects such as awareness raising, capacity building, stakeholder partnership, and skills training. None of these NGOs and development agencies labeled their projects in social marketing terms, although some elements of social marketing were used in

project design and implementation (Truong & Hall, 2013). However, only limited attention was given to the aspirations and expectations of the locals, particularly the poor (Truong et al., 2014).

METHOD

The research upon which this paper is based examines residents' understanding of the causes of poverty to consequently investigate the potential that social marketing bears for poverty reduction in the context of tourism. An important element was identifying what the target audience for poverty reduction interventions perceived as the cause of their poverty and how they understood the role of tourism as a reduction measure. A phenomenological approach was adopted that focuses on the lived experiences of members of the study communities in order to allow local people to voice their opinions of poverty and alleviation barriers (Holden, Sonne, & Novelli, 2011; Szarycz, 2009). Research data was collected from August to November 2012. Most fieldwork was conducted in Sapa town and three communes (Lao Chai, Ta Van, Ta Phin) where tourism is more developed than in other communes in the region (Truong et al., 2014). They are also among the poorest communes in Sapa (SPC, 2009). The researchers conducted 47 semi-structured interviews with 47 local people in Vietnamese lasting 25-45 minutes and five interviews with development consultants in English language lasting 40-60 minutes). Notes were also taken from conversations with foreign tourists. Initially, interviews were carried out with members of the local Women's Union because they clearly understood local living conditions and were gatekeepers to local networks. A local guide was also hired throughout the fieldwork. Field notes were taken and used to enrich interview and observation data.

Some interviewees were chosen because their incomes were below the official national poverty lines (GSOV, 2012), while others were selected with the help of a member of the local Women's Union and these were not necessarily poor in economic terms. There were two main reasons for this purposive selection. First, local people might hold different views of poverty as compared to researchers and policy-makers (Holden et al., 2011). Second, other factors such as health, education, and social service access should also be considered in identifying people that official definitions of poverty may not capture (Truong et al., 2014). The key themes identified include local people's interpretation of poverty and poverty causes, experiences in tourism, and perception of the barriers to poverty alleviation. These themes are discussed below.

FINDINGS

Interviewees' Profiles

Of the 47 interviewees, 36 were female ranging from 15 to 71 years old and 11 were male from 13 to 71 years old. Local women were a majority in the interview sample because they are often family heads and are thus sensitive to financial matters and the living conditions of their families. The average age of interviewees was 36 years (female interviewees: 37; males: 31). In terms of ethnicity, 20 respondents were H'Mong, 18 Red Dzao, six Kinh who constitute the Vietnamese mainstream society, and three

are Dzay. Eleven people were based in Ta Van, ten in Ta Phin, six in Lao Chai, five in Sapa town, and 15 in other communes. All quotes are anonymized. Locals' perception of poverty is presented first before the causes of poverty are analyzed and the findings are put into relation with social marketing.

Local Perception of the Nature of Poverty

A large majority of interviewees indicated that growing rice is their main occupation and generates most income. Some also grow corn and medicinal fruit (which is grown under forest trees and exported to China). The perception of poverty is closely related to the amount of rice produced per year. When asked what poverty means to residents, most of the interviewees said it meant not producing enough rice to feed their families:

I think poverty means having a lack of rice. I do not know the poverty criteria that are applied by the local authority. (Linh, Ta Van commune)

Some respondents indicated that poverty is associated with a lack of income. To them, although they may have enough rice to feed their families, they are poor if they have no money to meet their daily needs. In addition, residents also distinguish hunger from poverty. If they do not have enough rice to feed their families, they suffer hunger. They consider themselves poor if they produce enough rice but have no money to buy vegetables and meat:

People here think of poverty as not having enough rice... My family has enough rice for the whole year but we still consider ourselves poor. If we do not have enough rice to eat, we call ourselves hunger sufferers. (Pham, Ta Van commune)

The perception of poverty also varies by education level. Younger and more educated respondents (i.e. who receive formal schooling) have more holistic perceptions of poverty:

Poverty is identified by the farming land area, the number of people in a family and total incomes. In general, many factors can be used to define poor families. (Do, Sapa town, university graduate)

However, such holistic views are atypical. Most local people frame poverty as something integral to their lives, i.e. rice to feed families. None of those interviewed understands the poverty criteria that are applied by Sapa's authority, nor does s/he have any idea about the poverty levels established by the Vietnamese government. While this may be attributed to education levels, it also suggests that government views of poverty are significantly different from those of poor people. Criticism of official definitions neither denies the hardships from which local people suffer nor undermines efforts to estimate the number of poor people. Rather, it emphasizes that poor people have their own meanings of poverty. This suggests that in order to develop meaningful interventions for the target audience (e.g. social marketing

initiatives) and therefore increase likelihood of success, poverty measures must start from a local understanding of poverty and its causes.

Local Perception of Poverty Causes

In explaining the causes of poverty, some interviewees attributed poverty to environmental factors, with limited arable land and bad weather frequently cited. Some blamed social causes for poverty, including overpopulation, lack of education, and hesitance to change. Others ascribed poverty to both external and internal causes.

Farming conditions are cited as the most important cause of poverty. The mountainous rice fields can accommodate only one annual crop (April-October). In addition, a shortage of water for the uphill terraced fields is a regular occurrence in the dry season. Traditionally, local people used to marry very young and have large families. This practice is still common among some H'Mong people (Kim, Ta Van commune). The issue in terms of rice production is that land is distributed equally as it is passed down the generations, and the resulting ever-smaller land parcels produce less rice. Some respondents also attributed poverty to location, increased commodity prices, and ineffective government assistance that did not necessarily reach the poorest households (Hoa, Ta Van commune; Kim, Ta Van commune).

Local people's hesitance to adopt new practices may be because they tend to trust people whom they "admire", instead of government officials (My, Ta Van commune). However, Shu (Sapa town) suggested that "the problem lies in government officials (the majority Kinh) explaining nothing to local people, who are culturally different". If this suggestion holds, it means that the Vietnamese government's approach to poverty alleviation, and even potentially those of some NGOs, may not have fully considered the different cultural contexts of people in Sapa and the relationships between them. This situation is likely also exacerbated by the many local people engaged in subsistence lifestyles. For example, although the Vietnamese government offers free education for ethnic minority children, local parents often keep their children working in rice fields or selling handicrafts instead of sending them to school. To other respondents, local people are poor because they are "lazy" (Hang, Sapa town), lack business knowledge (Shan, Lao Chai commune), are not educated (Lam, San Xa Ho commune), do not save money (Chien, Sapa town), or simply lack access to information (Peter, development agency, Sapa town). Some of these causes are also perceived to be barriers to local people participating in tourism.

Local People's Experiences With Tourism

Although tourism is promoted as an economic development and poverty alleviation tool in Sapa, the main beneficiaries of tourism are perceived to be private sector hotels and tour operators, often run by the majority Kinh people:

Business owners are only concerned about their own interests. Most of them are Kinh people. Ethnic minorities can only sell handicrafts. (Do, Sapa town)

Eight out of ten tourism businesses here are run by people coming from other areas. The other two are run by locals. However, they are all Kinh people. Private businesses only care about their own interests. (Tam, hotel staff, Sapa town)

Local ethnic minorities often lack the knowledge, skills, and capital needed to participate in tourism. Language is also a barrier because most of the respondents can only speak their own language and basic Vietnamese. Some can speak basic English, but writing skills are limited. In contrast, the majority of Kinh people are generally better educated with the knowledge, skills, funds, and networks to run tourism businesses. Since local ethnic minorities have little alternative livelihoods outside of the main rice crop, most of them are informally involved in tourism by following foreign tourists to sell handicrafts. Upon arriving at Sapa Square, Sapa Market, or at village entrances, tourists are approached by local women who introduce themselves and follow them on their treks, asking them to buy handicrafts. When local women are asked why they follow tourists, a common response is that it is because they are poor with much free time after the rice crop harvest and need money to buy food and fertilizer (Thanh, Lao Chai commune).

Selling handicrafts in the streets does not generate a stable income and there are long periods when sellers make no business at all. In addition, the work is tiring because the seller women often follow tourists on 20-24 km treks. Some local women know that tourists are not happy being followed (Tan and May, Thanh Kim commune) and others believe that some tourists may feel curious at first, but then are not comfortable once they realize local women are following them (Lam, San Xa Ho commune).

As a consequence, Sapa's authorities have attempted to stop local women from following tourists by allocating specific spaces in Sapa Market and Sapa Square for handicraft sellers. To get a space in the market, interested people need to register at a local office, while in the square, all sellers can sell their products. A Code of Conduct team was formed to oversee handicraft sellers and fine sellers if caught selling handicrafts in the streets. However, the number of street vendors did not decrease, with some women complaining that they could not get a space to sell their products (Tan and May, Thanh Kim commune). After all, most spaces in the market are occupied by Kinh people and only some spaces on the second floor are allocated to ethnic minorities. At the same time, the Square is an unroofed outdoor space, where handicraft sellers cannot do business on sunny or rainy days. This suggests that the options offered by Sapa's authority are less beneficial than following tourists to sell handicrafts (Do, Sapa town). However, the economic benefits for handicraft sellers are also doubtful, with some interviewees stating that many seller women do not want to stay in the market and square because they can sell more handicrafts by following tourists (Do, Sapa town).

Some development agencies (e.g. SNV Netherlands Development Agency) have worked with Sapa's authority to reduce the number of handicraft sellers. A community market was built in Ta Phin, where local women could sell handicrafts. However, the market was small, did not have enough spaces for all sellers and was inappropriately located. Those who did not get a space kept following tourists and sold more handicrafts. Other markets built in Lao Chai and Ta Van were also abandoned

because they were not well located. Attempts to develop communal entrance tickets to villages have also not benefited the poor. The ticketing offices are small posts established at the entrance of such villages as Cat Cat and Ta Phin and the fees are supposed to be used for community development. However, a widespread perception among local people is that the fees have primarily benefited village chiefs and/or commune leaders: “They [local authorities] keep saying that the ticket fees belong to the villagers but I have seen nothing” (Lien, San Xa Ho commune; Su, Ta Van commune). As such, the failure of the local authority and development agencies to stop local women from following tourists can be attributed both to the economically less attractive alternatives offered and the longstanding business practices of local women.

Perceived Barriers to Poverty Alleviation Through Tourism

When respondents were asked about the main barriers they face in moving out of poverty, insufficient capital was most frequently cited, followed by limited farming land. These barriers were also mentioned by the consultants of development agencies in Sapa (Peter, development agency, Sapa town). A large majority of residents in Sapa wish to participate in tourism, often as homestay owners, tour guides, and handicraft sellers as a means to move out of poverty. After all, local people view tourism as one of the few, if not the only, remaining income generator, although they are aware that in many cases tourism does not necessarily alleviate poverty. Nevertheless, a large majority of ethnic minority women in Sapa are only able to participate in tourism informally, by following tourists to sell handicrafts. Reasons for this are firstly that they are unable to get formal tourism jobs such as working in hotels and travel agencies. Secondly, the alternatives offered by Sapa’s authority (e.g. market spaces) are not adequate for all sellers and are economically less beneficial than following tourists. Many local women are used to this selling practice, some of whom have over ten years of experience. However, this way of selling has resulted in tourists’ discomfort as discussed above.

Although it is a focal point for government and many NGOs, tourism is not necessarily the only way to lift poor people out of poverty in Sapa. Indeed, one tourism consultant stated, “We need to agree that tourism is one alternative livelihood option only” (Quang, tourism consultant, Hanoi). Instead, making more forest land available for farming could be an appropriate measure and a way of reducing the number of handicraft sellers. As the above consultant described, “If farmers are deprived of land, then they lose their most powerful weapon”. If given more land, local people could grow more rice and medicinal fruit and thereby earn an income by providing some locally produced food to tourism businesses. However, increased land in the forest and/or income earned from agriculture or tourism does not necessarily translate into poverty alleviation if the population keeps growing or if income is not invested in longer-term developments.

Use of Social Marketing for Poverty Alleviation Through Tourism

Although not aware of social marketing, project managers and consultants may have already utilized several or all elements of this concept (Truong & Hall, 2013), also in

the case of Sapa. Indeed, one of the local tourism consultants stated,

As practitioners, we do not pay substantial attention to the theoretical aspects of social marketing. I think it is a new concept. However, I want to emphasize that it is very likely tourism practitioners have already used the tools of social marketing, although they are not aware of the concept. (Quang, tourism consultant, Hanoi)

Quang went on to elaborate the tools used in projects in which he has been involved:

Our project tools have been used to influence a variety of audiences, including host communities, schools, communal authority, and even the National Administration of Tourism. Differing interventions are made on different audience segments. For example, policy changes are advocated at management bodies, while responsible travel clubs are established to target businesses and tourists. Environmental awareness programmes, extra-curricular activities, and contests are organized at school level. Performing competitions are also held as we realize that local ethnic minorities have a keen passion for performances. Additionally, training sessions and study tours are also provided. (Quang, tourism consultant, Hanoi).

The tools described above appear to match the elements of the social marketing benchmarks previously discussed. This reinforces the argument that social marketing as an approach seems to have been applied in some tourism projects but is not labeled specifically as social marketing.

However, it needs to be noted that the majority of the tourism consultants interviewed have never heard about the concept of social marketing:

I have no idea about social marketing. I think social marketing consists of all marketing activities undertaken to benefit all segments in society. (Thang, tourism consultant, Hanoi)

I am not aware of the social marketing concept. I heard about it but I do not really know about it. I think it involves the use of social media technologies and so on. (Michael, tourism consultant, Hanoi)

The above comments clearly raise questions about the potential contribution of social marketing to development. As noted above, a key element of social marketing is to provide something of interest to the target audience (“exchange”, tangible and/or intangible). Target audience research helps identify what the exchange might be that leads to the adoption of new practices. Importantly, exchange does not just refer to an exchange in monetary terms. Although tangible benefits (e.g. money) may have direct behavior impacts, intangible benefits (e.g. community pride, sense of ownership) may generate long-term outcomes (Hall, 2014; Truong & Hall, 2013). Ultimately, the perceived benefits of any new behavior must outweigh the perceived costs in order for people to try it.

Therefore, focus may be put on (Hall, 2014, p. 75):

- Increasing and highlighting the benefits to the target audience
- Decreasing or de-emphasizing the barriers to the adoption of new behaviors
- Changing the product, place, price or promotion to meet the exchange

A social marketing approach assists in framing development issues differently. For example, several previous interventions trying to provide women in Sapa with alternative venues for the selling of handicrafts have failed, as discussed earlier. Therefore, a social marketing approach, which attaches particular importance to understanding the target audience, may provide new insights on how best to help alleviate poverty.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This research showed that local people in Sapa, of whom a majority are rice farmers, perceive poverty mainly as a lack of rice. Some consider themselves as poor although they may produce enough rice but do not have sufficient money to meet their daily needs. Multiple views of poverty were found, particularly among the educated that combine several factors in defining poverty (e.g. land area, family size). The most critical barrier to poverty alleviation in Sapa is the lack of capital and farming land. Offering the local poor preferential loans and access to secure land tenure therefore appears to be the most appropriate exchange to reduce the number of handicraft sellers.

Although Sapa's authority and NGOs have embraced tourism as a poverty alleviation tool, poor people have no access to reap benefits from tourism. The aspirations and expectations of the local poor in relation to tourism have been considered only to a limited extent by either the local authority or project organizations. Social marketing can address this issue given its focus on the target audience in designing and implementing any behavioral change intervention (Hall, 2014; Truong & Hall, 2013). Furthermore, without such research, the barriers to improve well-being are often not recognized. Again, it is social marketing's strong focus on the target audience that differentiates it from other participatory approaches as discussed earlier in this paper (Hall, 2014).

This study revealed that most local women are involved in tourism informally, following tourists to sell handicrafts, which causes discomfort on the tourists' side. Although efforts have been made by Sapa's authority and development agencies to manage the situation, the issue remains. When development agencies have sought to bring about behavioral change, appropriate research has not been undertaken to understand local people's needs (e.g. for more farming land), including cultural differences. As a consequence, the interventions have not been designed effectively. Local people have not been asked previously about reasons for their behavior (e.g. why they keep following tourists) and what they could do to improve their well-being. This is arguably one of the main contributions that a social marketing approach can bring to poverty alleviation strategies. It is significant not just for 'downstream' social marketing that focuses on the target audience but also 'upstream' social marketing that influences institutional perspectives (Hall, 2014). This approach also goes beyond many PPT and sustainable marketing practices (Hall, 2013; Raymond & Hall, 2008).

Nevertheless, even with a focus on a target audience, the capacity of social marketing to encourage social and economic change in tourism development is limited. The most critical structural barrier to poverty alleviation in Sapa is a lack of farming land and capital. However, even here a social marketing approach can help reveal the behavioral changes that can occur once structural conditions, often related to well-intended regulatory and policy measures, are changed (Hall, 2013). There is a need for authorities to view farming land and practices as part of long-term poverty reduction measures. An integrated approach to poverty reduction that incorporates local as well as agency perspectives is therefore required. Such an approach would combine an appropriate downstream focus on behavioral change with an upstream emphasis on changing institutional practices and structures.

This research suggests that the experience of the Bangladeshi Grameen Bank (Yunus, 2007) may offer some important learning points for the implementation of a social marketing program in Sapa (Table 1). It is recommended that, at the *downstream* level, a community microloan scheme would be an appropriate development. A community fund may also be established where the communal entrance fees are retained. Groups of four to five local poor households each (headed by women) are formed (*target audience*) and provided with preferential loans (*exchange*). Group members may be empowered to manage the loans without having to pay an interest rate. Given preferential (non-interest) loans, it is likely that the burden of interest and hence the barrier to borrowing loans is waived. The provided loans should be adequate to establish a micro business (e.g. a handicraft shop) or purchase building material (e.g. for a homestay). Given their participation in community activities, members of the local Women's Union may assist in disseminating information, motivating poor families, promoting local cultural values, and monitoring the effective use of the given loans. The desired outcome is a reduction in the number of handicraft sellers in the streets (*behavior change as the objective of the program*). However, such measures should not occur in isolation and the development of a new land policy is essential. Similarly, loans may impoverish poor people if they are not effectively invested or if they are invested in homestay or handicraft business but do not generate profits due to limited tourists. This argument suggests that social marketing interventions should be made for encouraging the private sector in Sapa to support poor people by recommending guests to stay overnight in local homestays and by training homestay owners in skills connected to hosting tourists, thereby bridging the divide between profit making and poverty alleviation.

At the upstream level, the government of Vietnam may facilitate favorable conditions for the recruitment of poor people by tourism businesses. For example, incentives (e.g. partial tax exemption) can support businesses that employ and provide vocational training to poor people. In addition, some provisions may be added to national tourism legislation that encourage tourism businesses to provide equal employment, income, and promotion opportunities to poor ethnic minorities. These measures would be particularly significant given that Vietnam's Tourism Law already advocates tourism development that helps improve the living conditions of poor people in areas with socio-economic difficulties (Truong, 2013).

Program Element	Description
Behavior change goal	Encouraging local women to stop following tourists to sell hand-crafts.
Target audience	Poor people in Lao Chai, Ta Van, Ta Phin, and Sapa town who lack capital and land.
Exchange	(a) Microloans for buying wood and building material (home-stays), opening handicraft shops or other small businesses. (b) Farming land for growing rice and medicinal fruit.
Marketing Mix	(a) Product: Microloans, farming land. (b) Price: Loans are interest-free (or otherwise a token interest rate may apply) (see (e)). (c) Promotion: Information is disseminated by members of the local Women's Union, local elders, and village chiefs. These people may be trained to work effectively with poor people. Other mediums may also be used such as brochures and flyers. (d) Place: Lao Chai, Ta Van, Ta Phin, and Sapa town, where a microloan scheme and/or community fund is established. (e) Collateral requirements: Groups of poor households are formed, which are headed by women. These women supervise the effective use of the loans. Loan recipients may be required to be committed to reducing birth rates and sending children to school. They may also need to be committed to protecting the land allocated to them. (f) Process: A simple loan application process with minimal paperwork is used.
Upstream Targeting	(a) Communal authorities, village chiefs, and Women's Union participate in assisting poor people. (b) Local tourism businesses are encouraged to provide employment and/or income opportunities to poor people. (c) National government: Advocacies may be undertaken to promote changes in relevant land and/or forest policies. Changes in the <i>Tourism Law</i> may also be required to provide incentives to businesses that offer employment and income to poor people. (d) Other stakeholders such as foreign NGOs may participate in working with the GOV and making program activities recognized and supported by the GOV.
Competition	Local people are used to following tourists; tension between tourism growth, poverty alleviation, and sustainable development.

Table 1. Summary of a proposed social marketing program for Sapa (own compilation).

CONCLUSION

This research has explored the poverty reduction potential of social marketing in the tourist town of Sapa, Vietnam. Through participant observations and semi-structured interviews with local poor people, this study has shown that poverty tends to be interpreted relatively differently and is attributed to both internal and external causes. Although tourism may be a potential contributor to poverty alleviation in Sapa, the potential to distribute benefits has been substantially reduced by barriers to business development and employment. The wealthier members of society and tour

operators are perceived as the main beneficiaries of tourism. Local women often follow tourists to sell handicrafts, resulting in discomfort on tourists' side and conflict amongst community members. The most critical barriers preventing participation include insufficient knowledge, skills, work experience, and funds, and poor foreign language proficiency. Overall, limited capital and farming land is the most important obstacle to poverty alleviation. A well-developed social marketing approach that focuses on the needs of the target audience would allow this audience to have a voice in change processes, much more than in the context of PPT. Indeed, an appropriately structured social marketing approach will not only seek to ask what kind of tourism places want to pursue, but ultimately, whether they wish to introduce tourism at all (Hall, 2007). There is possibly no better way to establish meaningful approaches to poverty alleviation than to understand the locally poor, and to do so by raising important questions as well as allowing them to voice their opinions. It is at this point that social marketing holds great potential given its focus on gaining insights into the target audience and their behaviors. Strong social marketing helps identify the poor amongst all community members, assists in understanding their needs and wants, and ultimately helps bring their marginalized voices to the attention of those making policies and decisions that affect their lives. While this paper has shown that social marketing can be a useful tool in addressing poverty reduction through tourism, more research is required that specifically focuses on social marketing initiatives and their results in practice.



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