

APPRECIATIVE INQUIRY: AN ALTERNATIVE RESEARCH APPROACH FOR SUSTAINABLE RURAL TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Tourism is one of the world's fastest growing industries, and is a major source of income for developing countries. The opportunities offered by the tourism industry globally are unquestionable, and every country seeks to stimulate sustainable economic growth based on employment opportunities. Study on the potential of developing tourism activities in rural areas may increase benefits received from tourism activities that will ensure synergy between tourism development and biodiversity conservation. Thus, this paper attempts to discuss the significance of sustainable rural tourism development and the application of Appreciative Inquiry approach as one of the alternative tourism research tool. AI may offer researchers another worldwide and methodology for framing and conducting tourism research. It does not mean that AI will replace all research approaches or can overcome all the challenges of conducting research. However, AI can be considered as a new method, approach or strategy for tourism research, which initiates positive changes especially in rural communities.

Keywords: *appreciative inquiry, rural tourism, sustainable development, sustainable tourism, community development*

INTRODUCTION

Rural tourism as a sustainable development alternative

Sustainable development is now widely promoted as a holistic concept that aims to integrate social, economic and cultural policies to ensure high-quality growth in the context to which it is applied (Gronau & Kaufmann, 2008). Rather than putting the emphasis on the question of whether the tourism industry can be sustainable or how sustainable can it be, it is better focus on the question of whether tourism can support sustainable development or not. The sustainable development must improve the economic standard of living, improve peoples' quality of life while at the same time protecting and enhancing the natural and cultural environment(Reid & Schwab, 2006). They added that although sustainable development has been widely accepted as an international standard, for many countries it remains a concept that are seen by citizens as artificially superimposed on their domestic policy environment. The term of sustainable can be defined in various ways according to people's perceptions and belief. According to Bruntland (1987), sustainable tourism is "*tourism that respects both local people and traveller, cultural heritage and the environment*", which seeks to provide people with an exciting and educational holiday that is also of benefit to the nation's economy. In contrast, George, Mair, and Reid (2009); Reid and Schwab (2006)asserted that there is no single definition for the term of sustainable development in tourism as they believed that a great deal of ambiguity associated with the concept because it is value laden and interpreted differently by different group. However, (Gronau & Kaufmann, 2008) claimed that a clear contradiction between sustainable principles and tourism development can be identified in the field of spatial inequality of development.

Sustainable development is a visionary development paradigm. Over the past 20 years, government and private sector businesses have accepted it as a guiding principle(Liew-Tsonis & Cheuk, 2000). More sustainable development directions are needed, which requires new discussion, cooperation and most importantly, dedication from tourism-related businesses (Castellani & Sala, 2010). Although rural

tourism in Malaysia has been under development for a long time, major gaps still exist in this industry, especially in the field of sustainable rural tourism. Many efforts have been made to enhance the demand for rural tourism as well as to improve the planning, management and development approaches for rural tourism. Nevertheless, efforts have been insufficient as yet and there are still disturbing issues which do not reflect the sustainable rural tourism practices (Jaini, Anuar, & Daim, 2012). The development of rural tourism has been seen as a tool to improve the accessibility to remote areas, where it provides wider opportunities between tourists and local communities and the roles of consumers and service providers (Mathew, 2005).

Tourism industry has tremendous potential for sustainable tourism development, particularly environmentally and culturally sensitive sites (Bramwell & Lane, 2012). Along with rapid growth, a diversification of tourism products and destinations is taking place, increasing demand for alternative types of tourism. Thus, sustainable development for community tourism should improve quality of life by optimizing local economic benefits, protecting the natural and built environment, and providing a high-quality experience for visitors. They should aim to provide long-term economic linkages between communities and industries (Nunkoo & Ramkissoon, 2010) and minimize the negative effects of tourism on the natural environment thus may improve the socio-cultural well-being of the communities (Egbali, Nosrat, & Sayyed Ali, 2011). Tourism activities also should be developed adhering to the principles of sustainable development and in collaboration with the various stakeholders (Sharpley, 2009) for example tourism companies and organizations both at local and national level. Community stakeholders, including the state government, tourists, hosts, as well as tour operators and other tourist-related business should implement ethical responsibilities and codes of conduct in order to ensure the sustainability of tourism development. To cater to changing demands, there is also a need for greater ties between environmentally-oriented sustainable development and the role of entrepreneurship in economic development in underdeveloped communities (Hall, Daneke, & Lenox, 2010).

Sustainable development strategies for rural tourism development

One of the fundamental assumptions of underpinning the concept of sustainable tourism development is that there has been an increase in environmental concern on the part of tourists and hence, growing demand for 'responsible' travel experiences. Indeed, other research has consistently demonstrated that tourism is relatively immune to environmental concerns (or that 'responsible' tourist behaviour is motivated by factors other than environmental concern), such as cost of travelling and climate change (Hunter & Shaw, 2007). Thus, a significant gap remains between the idealism of the concept of sustainable tourism development as explored at length within academic circles and the reality of tourism development in practice. In spite of the large amount of literature on this topic, a consistent framework of the so-called sustainable tourism has not been developed yet (Gronau & Kaufmann, 2008). Besides, the general assumption predicting that there can be a sustainable form of tourism is often questioned. For instance, objections raised on the various contradictions between the holistic concept of sustainability and the more product-centred perspective of the global industry. Illuminating the holistic perspective, Lane (1994); (2005) views sustainable tourism as a balanced triangular relation between "host areas and their habitats and people, holiday makers and the tourism industry" with no stakeholder upsetting the equilibrium. This focus on a balanced relationship is supported by Sharpley (2000) holding that "the potential for sustainable tourism development exists if no single factor or stakeholder predominates".

The careful balance of economic and environmental concerns is truly important as tourism industry also provides an important source of income, employment and wealth to the country. Thus, there is a need to ensure that the tourism industry remains both environmentally and economically sustainable (Siti-Nabiha, Wahid, A.Amran, Haat, & Abustan, 2009). In ensuring the sustainability of the industry, protection of the environment is very important. Indeed, sustainable development has become an important criterion in attracting tourists and it is proved that it sustainability in tourism can only be achieved if all the stakeholders are really applying the concept and practices of sus-

tainability (Jaini et al., 2012). Moreover, tourism can be an important module while introducing the concepts of sustainability in rural areas. Designated forms of tourism based on authenticity and local culture as well as entrepreneurship also can connect the aims of sustainability and the interest of the locals to improve their standard of living (Gronau & Kaufmann, 2008).

In order for the tourism industry to be sustainable, it need to be integrated with a broader sustainable development strategy particularly with effective multi-stakeholders' engagement (Siti-Nabiha et al., 2009). Besides, it should be integrated with other management functions and actions in line with the strategy that should be implemented. More importantly, sustainable tourism development requires a process of planning and management that bring together the interests and concerns of a diverse group of stakeholders in a sustainable and strategic way (Sharpley, 2009). The success of achieving sustainable tourism however, depend very much on how we define each issues, scopes and seriousness as well as full support and commitments from all stakeholders. The design planning of sustainable tourism should be made and presented at every level to ensure consistent understanding of the concept. The development of tourism in rural areas should also place high value development sustainability and remain aware of the need preserve fragile environments and support conservation (WTO, 2001).

To ensure the sustainability of rural tourism development, a framework also should be built to understand the relationship between tourism impacts and community identity. This has been addressed byHwang et al. (2012)where they found that community-based action in rural tourism development was connected with a capacity to protect one's community from outside threats and foster development that aligns with its sense of community. Focusing on the community's involvement in rural tourism development is utmost important, as they are the industry's key players that involved in tourism activities. Local communities generally need to ensure that a sustainable approach is taken in regard to the development of other economic activities in the area and that such development does not erode fragile tourism resources. If development is to be sustainable, it must improve the standard of living and quality of life while pro-

tecting and enhancing the natural and cultural environment (Reid & Schwab, 2006). Community capacity however, is widely addressed as an essential strategy for improving the process of the tourism development that can benefit local communities (Moscardo, 2008; Walker, 2008). With that respect, community leaders play a fundamental role in addressing the issues of tourism development particularly in rural communities.

Tourism activities should preserve the culture of the local communities and provide adequate economic opportunities for local communities whilst guarding them against exploitation. Due to the nature of the tourism industry, a sustainable tourism development should be based on coordinated actions between the different sectors involved (Siti-Nabiha et al., 2009). Indeed, integrated and meaningful multi-stakeholders participations from a broad spectrum of the host communities are needed while partnership should be at the federal, states and local level and should be back by strong political leadership (Haven Tang & Jones, 2012; Randelović, Stefanović, & Azemović, 2012; Siti-Nabiha et al., 2009). It has been noted that little attention has been given to purposefully investigating the roles and responsibilities of local government in addressing sustainable development within tourism contexts (Ruhanen, 2012). Studies also argue that effective management systems for sustainable tourism development ultimately required the intervention and regulations from the public sector. The government's involvement and direction in addressing or attempting to meet the objectives of sustainable development are widely supported by local communities (Liu, 2010; Weaver, 2006).

Besides ensuring the preservation of the environment, the role of tourism as an agent of socio-economic growth and development has become more pervasive. Within the developed world, peripheral or economically disadvantaged regions are increasingly focusing on tourism as a means of stimulating economic and social regeneration. Whereas for many less developed countries, tourism has come to represent a vital ingredient of their development policies. Although tourism has undoubtedly contributed to the socio-economic development in a number of less developed countries, such development is less evident, challenging the widespread belief in tourism's potential development contribution (Sharpley, 2009). The concepts and princi-

ples of sustainable rural tourism development can be illustrated in the Figure 1, which it consists of three important elements, namely; social, environment and economic. The figure show the basic understanding of the concept of sustainable development from the tourism context, which it represents a sustainable approach to economic, social and environment development. Hence, it plays an important role in the spatial development of these aspects and the spreading of benefits to undeveloped regions. Therefore, it is believed that there will be powerful incentives to conserve these resources if the right stakeholders are involved.

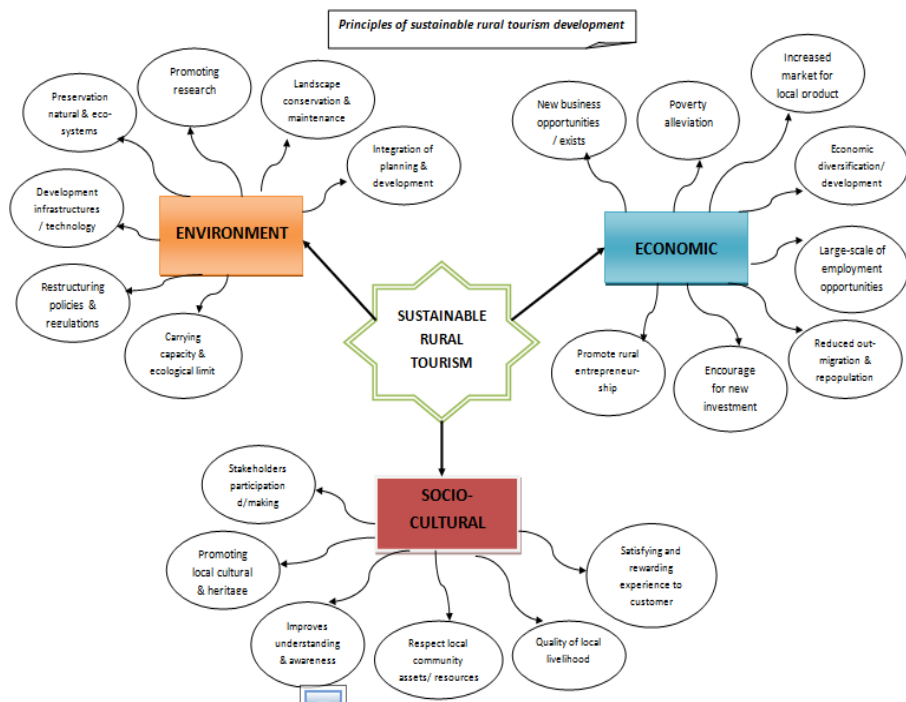


Figure 1: Principles of sustainable rural tourism development (Clarke, 1997; Hwang, Stewart, & Ko, 2012; Liburd & Edwards, 2010)

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) for sustainable rural tourism development

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) has been applied in the field of community development, especially in developing countries. Organizers used AI

to help create and strengthen community development organizations in India (Lewis, 2008). Even after the successful implementation of AI approach into the development field, however, it has been irregularly used for research purposes, especially in the field of tourism (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012; Raymond & Hall, 2008a). In 1986, AI was first established by David Cooperrider in his doctoral thesis on “Appreciative Inquiry: Toward a methodology for understanding and enhancing organizational innovation” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008). It has been practiced around the world for more than a decade by non-profit organizations, businesses, families, health care organizations, school as well as government. Since the late 1980s, AI has been promoted in a wide variety of organizations and for many different purposes and has been applied to strategic planning, culture transformation, increasing customer satisfaction, organization redesign as well as for leadership development. Recently, AI also has been applied to integrate organizations after a merger, to build alliances and union-management partnerships, for peace building and for implementing educational reform and economic development efforts (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

Appreciative Inquiry is an increasingly important area, which it offers a positive and strength-based approach to rural community development (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Although AI origins are in academia and there is a considerable body of literature covering its organization applications and impacts. AI has its roots in organizational development and strategies that help organizations transform themselves. It has traditionally been used as an approach to organization analysis, learning and development that is uniquely intended for discovering, understanding and fostering innovations and transformation in human/social system (The Mountain Institute, 2000). One of the most significant discussions of AI is a strength-based participatory action research method that is based on the constructivist paradigm and follows grounded theory procedure (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). It serve as framework for personal development or coaching, partnership or alliance building and large-scale community or organization (Finegold, Holland, & Lingham, 2002; Raymond & Hall, 2008a).

AI approach is typically used to facilitate positive developments within organizations and it could be employed in this way within the tourism industry (Raymond & Hall, 2008a). This approach has been suggested by previous studies (Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012; Raymond & Hall, 2008a), which they believed that the task of tourism development in rural areas, conservation of environment and livelihood improvement is only possible through the joint effort of a range of stakeholders, including governments, tourism entrepreneurs, non-profit organizations and local people itself. It is applicable and interesting approach as AI treats people as human beings, not machines. It creates identity and knowledge in relation to one another such as through the story telling, sharing the same values, beliefs and wisdom. AI also can be classified as a strength-based participatory action research method that is based on the constructivist paradigm and follows grounded theory procedure (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012). They recommended for applying AI to tourism research for various reasons i.e., for problem-centric in tourism research, which by understanding the pressing problems and their causes, researchers can diverse and implement appropriate solutions.

More importantly, AI approach could be an appropriate method and may help to empower rural communities since they are often alienated by the use of technology and technical jargon (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2011, 2012), which this method does not require respondents to read text-based instrument. Alternative method likes interview, focus group as well as brainstorming may encourage participants to speak more honestly about any problems they may have experienced (Raymond & Hall, 2008a). Understanding the poorest of the poor, minority, indigenous people and women is even harder, which compels a need for non-traditional methods of data gathering and verification (Koster & Lemelin, 2009; Michael, 2005; Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012). Thus, AI approach has been identified as an appropriate method to gain an in-depth understanding of local communities' knowledge (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012; Raymond & Hall, 2008a). They demonstrated that AI may offer researchers another worldwide and methodology for framing and conducting tourism research. It does not mean that AI will replace all research approaches or can overcome all the challenges of conducting research. However, AI

can be considered as a new method, approach or strategy for tourism research, which initiates positive changes especially in rural communities.

AI has potential to describe how focusing on the local communities' involvement served to create a compelling vision of tourism development in their areas for current and future contribution. The power of appreciating and valuing others in AI brings people together and due to this concept, AI has shown success when applied in both public and private educational setting (Judy & Hammond, 2006). Similarly in the field of tourism research, AI processes also provide opportunities for local communities and tourism stakeholders to focus on the positive that is happening in their place by collaboratively and generatively discovering new possibilities not previously considered (Laszlo & Cooperrider, 2010). It also emphasizes the generation of positive ideas among individuals within an organization and these ideas provides the structure for creating positive change and it demonstrate on what people value about themselves and their community or organization (Raymond & Hall, 2008a).

AI has been developed to gain and built enduring relationships between communities and the tourism industry based on the simple assumption that every organization or community has something that work-well and those strengths can be the starting point for creating positive change (Raymond & Hall, 2008a, 2008b). The application of AI in planning and managing conservation and development programs and activities in tourism field; to provide an additional approach that helps motivate people to plan and manage a collective vision of the best possible future (Koster & Lemelin, 2009; The Mountain Institute, 2000). Inviting people to participate in dialogues and share stories about their past and present achievements, assets, unexplored potentials, innovations, strengths, opportunities, benchmarks, high-point moments, tradition, lived value, core and distinctive competencies, expressions of wisdom and possible futures can be identify as "positive core" (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Cooperrider et al., 2008). From this, AI links the energy of the positive core directly to any change agenda and this links energy and excitement and a desire to move toward a shared dream.

The AI process engages entire communities and their stakeholders to create a future that works for everyone and can be used to guide conservation, large group meetings or whole-system effort (Finegold et al., 2002; Shariff, Van Gramberg, & Foley, 2010). No matter the purpose, the Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle is the foundation for change. The essence of all these models is based on a set of principles which generally follow the framework of the 4-D Cycle, (see Figure 2). Each AI process is home-grown and designated to meet the unique challenges of the organization and industry involved (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The “four D’s” of AI take many forms.

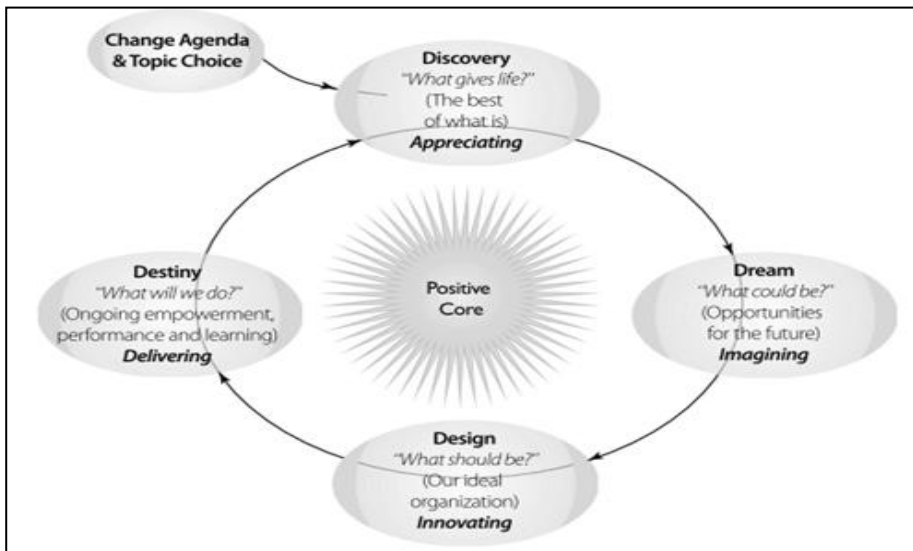


Figure 2: The Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010, p. 6)

1. **Discovery:**

At this stage, participants will reflect on and discuss the best of what is concerning the object of inquiry. Personal and organizational high-points are discovered, as well as what people value and how they hope and wish to enhance their organization’s social, economic and environmentally vitality.

2. **Dream:**

At this stage, participants are asked to picture their group's ideal image and try to figure out the common aspirations of all stakeholders. They should then attempt to create a symbolic representation of that image. This stage also requires participants to carefully listen to stories about their group at its best and to share their hopes and dreams for their collective future (Cooperrider et al., 2008). This helps create a clear results-oriented vision and uncover potential while asking higher-purpose questions, such as "What might be?" When the best of "what is" has been identified, the mind naturally begins to search further and to envision new possibilities (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

3. Design:

With a common vision of the future established, participants are asked to develop real-world proposals for the future. This involves more than just speculation; it requires a pro-active, inspiring statements of intent grounded in the successes of the past combined with new ideas for the future (Cooperrider et al., 2008). This stage will help enhance the organization by leveraging both its own past success and successes elsewhere with "strategic intent," signalling what the organizations wants more of and recognizing that the future is built around what can be and what is (Laszlo & Cooperrider, 2010). These activities are conducted in large group forums or within small teams (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

4. Destiny:

The destiny phase involves a series of actions inspired by the previous stages which support a continuous learning and innovation processes; this causes "what will be" to emerge (Cooperrider et al., 2008). This phrase specifically applies to personal and organizational commitments and the paths forward (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010), delivers on the new images of the future and is sustained by nurturing a collective sense of purpose. The destiny phrase is on-going and brings the organization back full-circle to the discovery phrase, in which continued application of the method may result in new topic choices, dialogues and continue learning.

CONCLUSION

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) approach has been identified with this in mind as an alternative tourism research tool for evaluating the impacts of rural tourism for sustainable development. AI is one of the recent approaches that used in tourism research, particularly at the community level. The approach is typically used to facilitate positive developments and may find use within the tourism industry. Nyaupane and Poudel (2012) stated that AI acts as a research method alternative to conventional action research in the organizational development field and is applicable to tourism study. In addition, Raymond and Hall (2008a) suggested that AI may be conducted regarding volunteer tourism processes in a similar way to which AI might be applied to commercial tourism. Recent AI development has found that the process not only helps an organization create images of the future but to create and nurture energy, a renewed commitment to change, and a sense of hope among people working to achieve the future (Calabrese, Hester, Friesen, & Burkhalter, 2010; Michael, 2005). The AI approach has emerged to counter traditional problem-solving approaches because it focuses on the strengths and successes of individuals, organizations and communities (Cooperrider et al., 2008). In a shift from the traditional approach of identifying, analyzing and solving problems, AI builds on the strengths of organizations or communities to develop a positive approach in addressing issues (Raymond & Hall, 2008a). This method seeks the strengths of individuals, organizations, communities and societies, giving life, health and excellent to the development of those human systems (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010).

AI may find use as an alternative tourism research tool for community development in rural tourism. It is believed that there is significant potential for the adoption of the AI approach within tourism discipline (Nyaupane & Poudel, 2012; Raymond & Hall, 2008a). These researchers believe that understanding the rural populations' knowledge, needs and priority, without alienating them from research, is an important goal. Existing studies have found that AI application is perceived to be a significant recent innovation in action-research and is an innovative research instrument tools. The process has been shown to be enjoyable in that it allows individuals to frame

problems in a more positive light. A major focus of the AI approach is learning the strengths and successes of people. AI is recognized as an important tool for empowering local people to take advantage of tourism development opportunities as it offers a positive, strengths-based approach to community development and was developed to establish enduring relationships between communities and the tourism industry. Past studies claimed that AI have significant potential for the adoption of the AI approach as it is rarely used currently in the field of tourism and it provides an opportunity to close the gap between theory and practice.

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