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Ertuna, Bengi; Kirbas, Gülsen  
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## Local community involvement in rural tourism development: The case of Kastamonu, Turkey

**Bengi Ertuna<sup>i</sup>**

Boğaziçi University (Turkey)

**Gülşen Kırbaş<sup>ii</sup>**

Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Association (Turkey)

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**Abstract:** The aim of this paper is to investigate the potential of local stakeholders in developing a rural tourism product. With this aim, a traditional harvest day event was initiated by the researchers and the event was organized and set up by the local stakeholders. Kastamonu, a rural destination in Turkey with a great potential for but with very limited rural tourism development, was selected for the conduct of this harvest day event. Participant observations and in-depth interviews are used to identify the factors that facilitate involvement of the local community in rural tourism product development. The results are expected to provide insights for the development of a framework relating to the assessment of the potential for sustainable rural tourism development in a given area.

**Keywords:** Sustainable tourism; Rural tourism; Local stakeholders; Resident attitudes; Kastamonu; Turkey.

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**Título:** Participación de la comunidad local en el desarrollo del turismo rural: el caso de Kastamonu, Turquía

**Resumen:** El objetivo de este trabajo es investigar el potencial de los actores locales para el desarrollo de un producto de turismo rural. Un evento tradicional del día de la cosecha fue iniciado por los investi-gadores con este objetivo, y organizado por las partes interesadas de la localidad. Kastamonu, un destino rural de Turquía con gran potencial de desarrollo pero con limitado turismo rural, fue seleccionado para llevar a cabo este evento del día de la cosecha. Se utilizaron la observación y participación de los investigadores, además de entrevistas en profundidad para identificar los factores que facilitan la participación de la comunidad local en el desarrollo del producto turístico rural. Los resultados esperan proporcionar información para el desarrollo de un marco de evaluación del potencial de desarrollo sostenible del turismo rural en un área determinada.

**Palabras clave:** Turismo sostenible; Turismo rural; Partes interesadas locales; Actitudes de los residentes; Kastamonu; Turquía.

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<sup>i</sup> Boğaziçi University, Turkey, bengie@boun.edu.tr.

<sup>ii</sup> Ecotourism and Sustainable Tourism Association, gulsen.kirbas@gmail.com.

## Introduction

Rural tourism has attracted increased attention from governments, non-governmental organizations, as a panacea of some of the pressing current problems of rural communities. Changes in agricultural technology and globalization have significantly changed the rural economic and social landscape. Increased input costs combined with international competition has decreased the income from traditional farming activities and supported diversification into non-farming activities. Rural tourism, which is a variant of eco-tourism, has emerged as an important means of addressing the complex socio-economic challenges of the rural communities following the decline of traditional agricultural economy (Sharpley and Vass, 2006). Concurrently, a number of factors has supported the generation of a demand for rural tourism. An increased longing for the countryside as a result of the pressures of modern urban life, a booming natural food market, and a desire to conserve traditional rural life are among the factors that supported the generation of this demand. Consequently, rural tourism has become an important component of the tourism industry in many different countries, but it has exhibited different forms in different contexts.

The development of the rural tourism activity has also attracted the attention of scholars. The definitions of rural tourism have proliferated together with the increased research interest on the topic. Overtime, the scope of rural tourism has also expanded. In spite of its multiple definitions and expanded scope, a consensus seems to be achieved on its objective as being sustainable. However, scholarly work on the dimensions of and criteria for sustainable tourism seems scarce (Saarinen, 2006). Although rural tourism is implicitly assumed to be a tool for sustainable development, there is some evidence that it can also become a source of conflict in the society. Issues may arise over the control of the natural capital and land use, the distribution of income and profits from tourism among its stakeholders and the potential displacement of local communities. In fact, rural tourism has eventually the potential to harm the environment and to have adverse impacts on the local communities unless carefully planned and managed (Cawley and Gillmor, 2008). For this reason, the issue of sustainable rural tourism development deserves more scholarly attention and evidence from different parts of the world, with different contextual characteristics.

This paper is part of a research which aims to develop a framework for the assessment of the potential for sustainable rural tourism development in a given area. The purpose of this paper is to investigate the factors that contribute to the involvement of local stakeholders in developing a rural tourism product. With this purpose, a traditional harvest day event was initiated by the researchers and set up by local stakeholders and community members. The behavior of local stakeholders was observed during the planning, organization and management of this event and interviews were conducted with participants of the event in order to identify their attitudes towards rural tourism and to determine the factors that facilitate the involvement of the local community in rural tourism development. Participant observations and interview results are expected to provide insights for the assessment of the potential for sustainable tourism in a given area.

## Literature on sustainable tourism development

Rural tourism utilizes a wide array of publicly and privately owned resources, involves a broad range of stakeholders and inherently includes the potential for harming the natural, cultural and social resources that it builds upon (Cawley and Gillmor, 2008). Thus, the issues of sustainability become important and attract increased attention in the literature on rural tourism development. The literature on sustainable rural tourism development focuses on the appropriate policies and strategies that would ensure the realization of the benefits associated with rural tourism while limiting its adverse impacts, especially on the natural environment and the local culture. It is built on the sustainable tourism development concept, which includes different approaches with respect to the treatment of different dimensions of sustainability. There are approaches that concentrate either on a single, individual dimension of sustainability, such as environmental, economic and social sustainability, or on a combination of dimensions (Augustyn, 1998). Studies that consider sustainability in a multidimensional manner are recently increasing. These studies advocate that the nature and complexity of rural tourism necessitate the adoption of a holistic approach that takes into account the diversity of the resources utilized and the stakeholders involved.

Adopting a multidimensional approach to sustainability, Augustyn (1998) uses the Action Strat-

egy for Sustainable Tourism Development model of Inskeep (1991) in order to evaluate the rural tourism development strategies in Poland. In this study, he identifies the following elements of rural tourism strategy at the national level that will contribute to a multidimensional sustainability objective: involvement of national authorities responsible for environmental protection in strategy formulation; identification of tourism activities that preserve the environmental and cultural heritage; support for local levels of government to develop their own strategies in line with the national strategy; inclusion of tourism in land use planning; involvement of various stakeholders and local communities in decision making on rural tourism development; inclusion of impact analysis; establishment of development of environmental accounting systems, assessment, monitoring and auditing schemes; inclusion of representatives of indigenous people on rural tourism advisory boards; and development of educational and awareness programs.

Cawley and Gillmor (2008) contribute to the literature by developing a model of integrated rural tourism development which takes into account all the different types of the resources used and the stakeholders involved, and apply this model to rural tourism development in western Ireland over the years 1992-2002. They use the concept of strategic fit from the strategic management literature in order to assess the effectiveness of integrated tourism in contributing to the local value added in terms of all the social, cultural, environmental and economic resources utilized. Their findings outline the features that contribute to the local value added. They emphasize the need for a regional, multidimensional sustainability strategy that is supported by all the stakeholders of rural tourism. Additionally, they suggest that the types of resources used and their form of use should be in line with the strategy. Appropriate resource use should be supported with planning, management and control of the resource use. Finally, networking between stakeholders that is embedded in local systems is found to be instrumental for achieving sustainability and contributing to local development. Although their research findings outline the basic principles of integrated rural tourism development, the issues relating to implementation are left for future studies. How to achieve broad stakeholder involvement in defining the strategy for sustainability in a given area, how to manage the resource use among different stakeholders in a way to comply with the sustainability

strategy and how to promote networking among stakeholders and embeddedness in local systems are major issues that seem to be the major challenges in promoting sustainability in tourism and contributing to rural development. Methods that can be used for achieving widespread participation in the tourism development process need to be developed (Reid et al., 2004).

In their study which aims to identify the factors that lead to success in rural tourism development, Wilson et al. (2001) claim that widespread participation and contribution of rural tourism entrepreneurs are critical for successful rural tourism development. According to the focus group results on six "successful" and "unsuccessful" communities in Illinois, the most important factors for successful rural tourism development are "a complete tourism package, good community leadership, support and participation of local government, strategic planning, coordination and cooperation between businesspersons and local leadership, coordination and cooperation between for rural tourism entrepreneurs, information and technical assistance for tourism development and promotion, a good convention and visitor bureaus and widespread community support for tourism" (Wilson et al., 2001:134). The authors use these results as support for the community-based approach in rural tourism development; however, they admit the difficulty and the complexity of creating intercommunity cooperation and collaboration and state the need for more research in these areas.

Active involvement and participation of residents in the tourism development process seem to be prerequisites for achieving the goal of sustainability and thereby improving the overall welfare in the community. In this regard, residents' attitudes seem to be critical, but complex. Residents' may have divergent attitudes. In a study investigating the attitudes of residents' to proposed tourism development, Mason and Cheyne (2000) find that opinions and attitudes are not homogenous in the communities. Their findings provide evidence for the complex nature of residents' attitudes to tourism, even in the pre-development stage when there is little tourism activity in their community. As time passes, their opinions and attitudes might also change with the increase in the tourism activity. Furthermore, community characteristics may also influence residents' attitudes. Using social exchange theory and destination life cycle model, Latkova and Vogt (2012) examine the impacts of the level of tourism and economic development on the residents' at-

titudes toward tourism. They are not able to provide strong evidence for the relationship between tourism and economic development levels of the communities and residents' attitudes. Based on their findings they suggest that historical and social factors might be influential rather than development experiences and stages and propose using other theories that integrate these factors.

In summary, rural tourism, which involves a wide range of community owned resources and different stakeholders with different interest, is a complex and intricate issue. In the literature, there seems to be a consensus that rural tourism development should be community based and involve a multidimensional sustainability strategy which is widely supported by all the stakeholders for ensuring sustainability and rural development. However, there is little evidence on how to achieve cooperation and collaboration between and among different stakeholders. The literature also points to the necessity of involvement of local community in decision making and planning of rural tourism development. Although residents' attitudes seem to be critical in achieving community involvement, the link between residents' attitudes and their participation in tourism development appears to be vague. Additionally, research on community problem solving relating to tourism development is scarce. Therefore, this paper aims to fill this void and identify the factors that facilitate the involvement of local stakeholders by observing their behavior during a researcher-initiated tourism product development event.

## Context

Rural tourism development is in its initial stages of development in Turkey (Karabati et al., 2009). There is a widespread recognition of the need to diversify the tourism product and develop alternative forms of tourism. Furthermore, massive migration from rural to urban areas, economic and social changes in rural areas as a result of the significant decline in the share of agricultural output and employment in the total economy and inequality in income distribution have generated an interest in rural development. There seems to be a consensus that rural tourism can be used as a tool to address the complex problems of rural areas. Various government agencies in Turkey, such as the State Planning Organization, Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs and

Ministry of Environment and Forestry, refer to rural tourism development among their priority aims in the coming years. A number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private initiatives are working to create recognition of ecological values and to develop pilot projects. Various rural communities seem to be interested in adopting tourism as a means for revitalizing their local economies. However, these efforts seem to be uncoordinated and loosely related to each other. Although rural tourism is stated among major means for rural development, it currently lacks a comprehensive strategy and an action plan at the national level, which are supported by the pertinent stakeholders. Over the last decade, sporadic rural tourism projects are observed in different areas, some of which have not been able to continue to the present.

In the "Turkish Tourism Strategy, 2023" (Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007), Kastamonu, is one of the designated areas for rural tourism development. The provinces of Kastamonu have various natural attractions and the area includes two national parks and is in the protection list of World Wildlife Forum (WWF). The economic activity in the villages is forestry, small-scale agriculture and livestock farming. It is a secluded area; thus the traditional lifestyle and methods of production have been mostly preserved in the villages. The population growth rate in 2009 is negative due to the decline in income from traditional agricultural activities and resulting migration to big cities. According to the results of the Addressed Based Population Registration System (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2010), the number of people which live in the city of Istanbul but registered in Kastamonu is 524,596. According to the same source, the population of Kastamonu is 361,222 people, of which 195,059 live in the province center and 166,163 live in the rural area. The number of people living in the rural area has decreased in 2010, from a figure of 169,839 in 2009. There are a number of attempts to develop rural tourism in the area, in the form of eco-tourism and organic agri-tourism. Stakeholders differ widely with respect to both the meaning and the means to develop rural tourism. Existing and potential rural tourism entrepreneurs, as well as local communities, are not involved in the planning of rural tourism development in the area.

## Methodology

The literature indicates that involvement of rural communities in the design and implementation of the tourism strategy is one of the critical factors



for achieving sustainable tourism development. Local communities should be willing to develop their own projects and cooperate with other stakeholders for the development of rural tourism in a given area. Methods of resource use planning, management and control should be consistent with the existing social structures. Therefore, assessment of the potential of the local community in developing a rural tourism product is one of the cornerstones of the general assessment of the potential of a given area for rural tourism development. However, communities and their stakeholders differ widely with respect to social, historical and economic attributes that influence their attitudes toward a matter of social interest, such as tourism development. Furthermore, the link between attitudes and participation in tourism development seems to be vague.

In order to investigate the factors that facilitate local community involvement in tourism product development, an event organization is undertaken and the patterns of behavior of different stakeholders are observed throughout the planning and implementation of the event. Additionally, interviews are conducted with the participants of the event in order to identify their attitudes toward rural tourism development in Kastamonu. A traditional harvest day event is selected and initiated by the researchers as the tourism product to be developed. The harvest day event is planned and organized by the local stakeholders using traditional methods and tools, such as threshing sledges. This event is used in this study since it is complementary to local economic activity, represents a revitalization of a traditional method of production and involves endogenously owned resources. Before initiating the event, a field trip was made to the area by the researchers on July 9-11, 2010. In this trip, various different channels were used in order to identify villages that still use or that can generate a set-up of a traditional harvest day. Planning and organization of the event were left to local stakeholders and another field trip was made to the area in August 2010 with a small group of researchers in order to participate in the harvest day event and to conduct the interviews.

The organization of the harvest day included local government representatives, local businessmen, prominent local community leaders, village heads (mukhtar) and the villagers of three villages. These villages were previously identified among the villages in which the residents continued to use traditional agriculture methods along with more modern

ones, had threshing sledges for harvesting and were willing to participate in the event. These villages are Eymür, Talipler and Gölcügez. The harvest day event took place in Eymür, which is 28 km. away from the province center of Kastamonu. It has 23 households and its population is about 200 people. These villages got electricity around the mid 1970s. The first tractors also arrived to these villages around the same dates. The mukhtar of Eymür, Hüseyin Mahmutoglu, bought his tractor in 1975 and used it also to pull the villagers to and from the market in Kastamonu. They started using tractors to pull the threshing sledges and gradually left the use of oxen in the 1980s, following the liberalization in the country. Talipler is a village which is 15 km away from the province center of Kastamonu and its population is about 180 people. There is a large mansion in the village which dates back to the Ottoman period and is being developed as a hotel. The original features of the mansion are preserved. Its mukhtar, İrfan Pehlivanoğlu, is interested in developing the village as a tourism destination. Gölcügez is 40 km away from the province center of Kastamonu and it is about 150 people. There are flint mines in the village, which were the major source of the stones used in threshing sledges until the 1980s, when modern equipment replaced threshing sledges. The mukhtar, Şemsettin Kaplan, is also interested in developing tourism as an alternative source of income for the village. Local stakeholders and the residents in these three villages participated in the planning and organization of the harvest day event, which took place in Eymür village on August 1, 2010. Interviews were conducted with the local participants in the event both before and during the event. A total of 60 participants were interviewed using semi-structured questionnaires.

## Findings

Prior to the first field trip, the event was introduced to various stakeholders in Kastamonu in order to identify different communities that have the resources and the willingness to work through the event. Representatives of the central and local government, heads of villages (mukhtars) businessmen, prominent local community leaders, representatives of related NGOs from Kastamonu were identified as stakeholders. Out of these stakeholders, the official ones were less effective in identifying with local rural communities. On the other hand, local businessmen and prominent commu-

nity leaders were more willing to contribute to the project and had more positive attitudes relating to rural tourism development in the area. These two groups were able to identify the right contacts in the rural communities and to effectively utilize them. Furthermore, they had a strong influence; the local rural communities respected their ideas and readily accepted their leadership in the initiation of the project. These two groups were able to stimulate the local communities in organizing the resources for undertaking the event. Representatives of the central government, senior officials of the local government, representatives of NGOs working for rural tourism development in the area and entrepreneurs involved in organic tourism were the less effective stakeholder groups in identifying potential rural communities and stimulating them for undertaking the rural tourism product development activity.

The interviews conducted with each of these groups during the first field trip in the area reveal a number of characteristics that relate to the effective stakeholder groups. Both of the groups share a genuine interest in rural development in the area. They are actively taking part and acting as leaders in community projects in diverse areas, such as health care, transportation and restoration of historic buildings. Consequently, they have access to different networks. They have significant personal investment in the area. They believe that tourism can complement the economic activity and contribute to rural development in the region. They also stress the importance of and the need for a multidimensional approach to sustainability in rural tourism. They share a concern and state that the benefits of the tourism activity should accrue to the rural community and its scale and form should be in line with social, cultural and environmental sustainability. On the other hand, the less effective stakeholder groups do not have significant personal investments in the area. Furthermore, they typically concentrate on a single or a couple of dimensions of sustainability in relation to rural tourism development. Some of these ineffective stakeholders tend to perceive rural tourism as building modern tourism facilities and infrastructure in the rural area. These common characteristics of the effective and the ineffective stakeholder groups offer some guidelines for the methodologies that can be developed for the assessment of the potential of rural communities in developing a rural tourism product. The findings indicate that the presence of local stakeholders with a genuine interest in local development, a significant

personal investment in the area and diverse networking channels seems to stimulate the rural communities to participate in the rural tourism activity and to facilitate their involvement in the planning, organization and management of the resources in the implementation stage.

A group of five researchers participated in the harvest day event organized in the village of Eymür on August 1, 2010. The village was identified and contacted by a local businessman and a prominent community leader and three villages participated in the organization and management of the resources for the event. The village headmen (mukhtars) of these three villages were the key persons in setting up the event and organizing the resources. The local businessman, the prominent community leader and the mukhtar of Talipler village also joined the group of researchers. The event was carried out on the harvest floor on the field owned by a family in the village. This family owned a traditional threshing sledge and two oxen which are used to pull the sledge. Owning the oxen was critical for performing the event in the traditional manner. The cut grain was piled in a haystack on the harvest floor, then the stack was pulled down with a long hooked wooden stick and scattered evenly on the floor by the farmer and his sons. The wife of the farmer brought the oxen and set up the sledge and started threshing the grain.

The threshing was the event of the day for the village. There was a widespread participation by the residents of the villages. At one point, a group of young men from other villages drove up to the harvest area in a truck and several women came in and out to see and participate in the event. Children of the village were encouraged to ride the threshing sledge by the older folk who wanted them to see how it had been in the old days. Lunch and refreshments were organized by the mukhtar. The local people were very enthusiastic to interact with the group of researchers and show them all the resources that they thought would be of interest to the outside group. Although the wind was not good enough, they also showed winnowing. The mukhtar demonstrated the use of wooden winnowing forks and explained how it was necessary to turn it at the top of the throw, spreading the grain for the breeze to work. They also made a demonstration using the mechanical thresher in the adjacent field.

The interviews conducted with the local community members participating in the harvest day event were coded with respect to their attitude to-

ward rural tourism development in their area and their willingness and ability to contribute to its planning and organization. The results indicate an overall positive attitude toward rural tourism development in their village. Participants also stated that they would be interested in working through similar projects that could lead to development of rural tourism products with commercial value. Most of the participants complained about the decrease in agricultural output and incomes and stated tourism development can solve problems. A number of participants hoped that rural tourism can contribute to the preservation of the local landscape. They also stated that rural tourism can create employment opportunities. Some also mentioned that development of rural tourism would give them a chance to preserve the social fabric in the country side as youngsters who went to work in the big cities would return back.

On the other hand, there was a consensus on the fact that they lacked the entrepreneurial skills and the means to start their own ventures or develop tourism related products. Some admitted that they did not know what would be of interest to tourists. A woman made a remark after the event that “we wouldn’t throw away our threshing sledges if we knew that tourists would be interested in seeing them”. A number of respondents mentioned other activities and attractions that could be built into the rural tourism product, such as riding horses, weaving baskets, making of small agricultural equipment and tools. Women seemed to be more willing to work in rural tourism development projects. However, they repeatedly arrived at the conclusion that they needed leaders who would guide them through the stages of tourism development. They also stressed the importance of seeing examples that would demonstrate how to proceed with rural tourism development.

With respect to their experiences relating to the event, they said they enjoyed the event themselves and interacting with the outsiders. They worked under the leadership of the mukhtars. Mukhtars identified the resources used in the event and they used their relatives in order to identify them. They communicated solely through cell phones. Mukhtars coordinated the event and actually worked through all the stages of it along with the other participants. All the tree mukhtars stated that they could coordinate home-stays and any other farm activities in their villages. Participant observations both before and during the event indicate that the rural community

members are enthusiastic about rural tourism development, they cooperate with other communities and successfully work together in the development of a local tourism product under the coordination of the mukhtars. Additionally, local businessmen and prominent community leaders seem to facilitate the involvement of mukhtars in these events. In this study, a genuine interest on rural development in the area and a preference for a multidimensional approach to sustainability were among the common characteristics of these two groups of stakeholders who facilitated the involvement of the local community in the production of a rural tourism product, a set-up harvest day event in this case.

## Conclusions

This paper is part of a research that aims to develop a framework for the assessment of the potential for sustainable rural tourism development in a given area. Rural tourism, which involves a wide range of community owned resources and different stakeholders with different interests, is a complex and intricate issue. The literature on sustainable tourism development indicates that community based approaches are more effective in ensuring sustainability and rural development. However, research on how to achieve broad stakeholder and community involvement in the planning, organization and implementation seems to be scarce. This study aims to contribute to the literature by identifying the factors that facilitate the participation of local stakeholders and community members in rural tourism product development. Willingness and the ability of the local stakeholders and community members to participate in the tourism product development were investigated by initiating a set-up event that would be carried out by the local stakeholders. The findings indicate that the presence of local stakeholders with a genuine interest in local development, a significant personal investment in the area and diverse networking channels seems to stimulate the rural communities to participate in the rural tourism activity and to facilitate their involvement in the planning, organization and management of the resources in the implementation stage. These local stakeholders operate through local community leaders, in this case the mukhtars, which create cooperation and collaboration within the community.

The results of this study are expected to provide insights for developing frameworks relating to the



assessment of the potential for sustainable tourism in a given area. Assessment of the potential of the local community members to participate in rural tourism development is an important component of the overall sustainability of a given area. However, further studies are needed to determine the factors facilitating cooperation and collaboration between local rural communities and other stakeholders of rural tourism. The factors that facilitate local community involvement appear to be contextual, but this study proposes a method that can be used to assess these factors in a given context. Identification of effective stakeholders and their common characteristics may help the policy makers in rural tourism development.

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