Tourism and Sustainable Community Development

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Sustainable tourism appeared as a concept adopting principles more or less similar to the sustainable development paradigm. Tourism is perceived in the context of sustainability as "meeting current uses and demands of tourism without impairing the natural and cultural heritage, or opportunities for collective enjoyment of tourists of the future" (Wahab&Pigram 1997: 4) Many conceptualizations of sustainable tourism adopt, a resource-based approach and a balanced triangular relationship between tourism-host areas and local communities, tourists and the tourism industry where no stakeholder upsets the equilibrium. In this respect, sustainable tourism claims to be a more effective means of achieving equitable social conditions on a broader scale, adopting new paradigm such as 'green economy' and 'pro-poor tourism'. One of the cornerstones of these approaches are that local participation is a key objective sustainable tourism development as a means to empower local communities through increasing level of involvement in decision-making of the planning of tourism and in the ownership and management of tourism businesses. Nevertheless, local community is not monolithic construct; rather it is inhibited by different groups with different perceptions and preferences with regard to tourism. So there are various types of community participation in the process of sustainable tourism development, yet none of them automatically leads to a situation where members of local communities reach an equal position relative to the other. So this paper argues that an important starting point of sustainable tourism is to establish a better understanding of the concept of community and the dynamic of the host-guest relationship and local-investor relationship employing social exchange theory. Social exchange in the context of sustainable tourism development, emphasizing on mutuality, then provides the platform of explicit negotiation among stakeholders over resources in a way to support equal distribution and justice bonding them in a way that the exchange relations become an intrinsic value. The paper will draw upon exploratory research in Iran to identify the future way forward for such an approach.

Key words: sustainable tourism, community participation, social exchange theory