

Labour Justice and Sustainable Tourism: The Centrality of Equity as a Sustainability Principle

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Abstract

What we value is intricately linked to our morality and our ethics, whether personal or corporate. Sustainability is essentially a statement of morality, embedding as it does the notion of inter- and intra-generational equity. This includes, among other things, social justice. The values underlying tourism development are dominated by the corporate expedient of profit and by the State concern for wealth generation, irrespective of the impacts on workers.

This paper examines current trends in tourism employment from a social justice perspective. It seeks to clarify the links between social justice and sustainable development and argues that de-politicized approaches to tourism development have severe implications for already marginalized groups and the ability to meet key sustainability challenges. This paper is specifically focused on a particular social justice concern, labour rights, and will explore this issue through a case study, namely, the situation for low-wage guest workers in Singapore's tourism industry.

The 'tourism industry' continually promotes itself as the world's largest employer and its ability to generate large numbers of jobs makes it a popular economic development strategy, in poor and wealthy nations alike. This numbers-driven approach, however, generally ignores the qualitative aspects of tourism employment, particularly for its low-wage workers. There are, in fact, indications that many tourism and tourism-related industries resemble service sector sweatshops characterized by low pay and poor working conditions. Tourism employment, particularly in the hospitality industry, tends to be highly stratified and reliant on a large base of low-paid workers who are often disproportionately made up of vulnerable groups, such as migrant and women workers, who often lack bargaining power. Global trends toward the casualization and subcontracting of work compounds the precariousness of the employment situation for workers who do not enjoy a strong history of collective bargaining vis-à-vis other industries.

The exploitation of low-wage labour in the tourism industry, relative to widespread tacit acknowledgement of its existence, remains under-studied and under-discussed. This is especially curious and somewhat disturbing, considering the huge surge of global interest in sustainable tourism (ST) and related, though equally contested concepts such as ‘ethical tourism’, and ‘responsible tourism’. While enthusiastically embracing concepts such as sustainable development (SD) and corporate social responsibility (CSR), as well as ‘causes’, such as poverty alleviation and human rights, the tourism industry, by and large, has done little to address *equity* issues with regards to tourism development. Equity is understood as fairness – rather than ‘sameness’, which it is often misunderstood to represent – and includes a strong commitment to both social *and* eco-justice.

Currently, sustainable tourism debates tend to focus on environmental issues, particularly in the area of ST indicators, thus missing other vital aspects of tourism’s place in the global political economy. Socio-cultural issues, in general, emphasize minimizing negative impacts on local communities and, increasingly, on poverty alleviation strategies in developing countries, where tourism growth is high. Within this discourse, the tourism industry’s ‘job creation’ rate is often cited as a primary reason to adopt it as a pro-poor strategy. Redistributive justice as an explicit goal and considerations of structural injustice as contributing to and/or exacerbating poverty are rare, particularly within policy circles.

The problem, therefore, is identified as one of *emphasis* as well as *perspective*. While environmental sustainability is a critical issue, particularly for a resource-intensive industry like tourism, ignoring or downplaying social justice issues will have grave consequences for what is also a labour-intensive industry. More crucially, it is the de-politicization of a value-laden discourse that is problematic – this is true whether the issue involves environmental or social concerns. Adopting a justice perspective means being cognizant of power asymmetries and acknowledging structural inequities – this has significant implications for the debate with regards to issues such as rights and responsibilities.

By focusing on the issue of low-wage guest workers along tourism’s supply chain in Singapore, this paper raises key questions about the costs of ignoring the equity principle in tourism development. Determined to expand the tourism industry, the Singapore government issued two licences to build large casinos on the island and is keen to host mega events such as the F1 Grand Prix and be an international business conference destination. Some key challenges facing the small island state are shortages of land, appropriate accommodation and labour.

The low-wage tourism labour market in Singapore is made up of a diverse group of workers, including both local and non-resident workers, with the latter most commonly referred to as

foreign workers. Labour migration policies shifted recently to reflect the growing demand for unskilled or low-skilled labour in the service sector, with growing numbers of workers from China and the Philippines being recruited to work in the hospitality sector (including food and beverage as well as retail outlets). Some common problems from a labour rights perspective with regards to such low-wage guest workers –including overseas trainees – include exorbitant labour recruitment fees, long working hours, lack of rest days, low pay and poor living conditions.

It has also become apparent that significant numbers of guest workers building high-profile tourism projects have been embroiled in workplace disputes over withheld wages, unlawful deductions and lack of overtime pay. Despite some media attention, this has not been adequately addressed by industry, with fingers pointing to subcontractors as well as sending country recruitment agents.

There are convergences as well as key differences with regards to the situation in Singapore. It is a highly regulated state with a tripartite labour relations system that is mostly pro-business, emphasizing industrial harmony over workers autonomy. It also does not have a minimum wage, for both local as well as guest workers. The social and political context within which tourism development takes place, therefore, is crucial. At the same time, in light of ‘labour shortages’ being a common refrain in a growing number of industrialized countries, including Australia, it is important to consider what the Singapore case means for countries keen to implement guest worker programs.

As tourism development continues to expand, it cannot afford to ignore growing concerns about labour exploitation and other forms of human rights abuses. Sustainable tourism discourse needs to integrate social justice perspectives which are cognizant of fundamentally unjust relations. Non-confrontational language and consensual approaches towards a highly political process – which tourism development undoubtedly is – only serves to sustain patterns of inequality and hinders progress towards a sustainable future.