

Pro-Poor Tourism as a Mechanism of Social Innovation and Empowerment

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Abstract

Pro-poor Tourism is a concept that emerged in the early 2000's as a means of fostering the development of sustainable tourism and as a means of ensuring the benefits of this were felt by local populations. Whilst the efficacy of pro-poor tourism and the impact that it makes for communities has been questioned over the last two decades, with research focus on how its impacts on communities and how it is operationalised, there has been less of a focus on the underpinnings of what pro-poor tourism is (or should be) from a theoretical perspective. In particular, there remains a lack of understanding as to what constitutes pro-poor tourism from a sociological perspective. In this review paper, the concept of social innovation is used to theoretically explain the mechanisms for successful implementation of pro-poor tourism initiatives, as a means of empowerment. The paper illustrates how pro-poor tourism can act as a means for empowering the poor and achieving sustainable development agendas, by utilising 'strong tradition' social innovation approaches in order to enable social action that can refigure societal power structures.

Keywords: Pro-poor Tourism; Social Innovation; Sustainable Development; Social Action; Tourism.

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1. Introduction

The importance of tourism as a mechanism for reducing poverty and promoting sustainable development is of increasing interest to scholars globally (Wen, Cai, Li, 2021). This is particularly important for low and middle income countries where tourism can often make up a significant proportion of income (Boonsiritomachai and Phonthanukitithaworn, 2019). The concept of Pro-Poor Tourism (pro-poor tourism) emerged in the late 1990's and early 2000's, to describe an approach to tourism development that 'delivers net benefits to the poor' (Roe and Urquhart, 2001:2), with these benefits delivered in economic, social or environmental forms. The focus on pro-poor tourism over the years academically has very

much been on understanding whether the suggested benefits of pro-poor tourism are in reality accrued for poor communities (Suardana and Sudiarta, 2016), understanding the role of stakeholders in supporting pro-poor tourism (Wen et al., 2021), and on product development within pro-poor tourism initiatives (Akrong, 2019). Harrison (2008) offered a critique of pro-poor tourism that was centred on the fact that it was neither distinct theoretically as a form of tourism, nor was it distinct from community-based tourism approaches.

This paper seeks to explore pro-poor tourism through the lens of social innovation, viewing pro-poor tourism as a form of social action and empowerment on behalf of the communities it supports. By embedding pro-poor tourism within Weberian (1947) concepts of social action and Mulgan's (2019) notion of social innovation as a means of

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empowerment, this review paper makes an original contribution to the field of pro-poor tourism by theoretically distinguishing it as a unique approach to tourism that can have positive impacts on poor communities. This review paper does this through a synthesis of literature on pro-poor tourism, social innovation and sustainable development, embedded within sociological theory centred on social action. In doing so, it seeks to offer a model for pro-poor tourism that transcends existing literature on the subject to provide a roadmap for future research in the area. The paper makes an original contribution to knowledge by illustrating how pro-poor tourism approaches, and sustainable tourism more generally, could be much more impactful if they engaged principles embedded in the ‘strong tradition’ of social innovation, centred on collaboration, ideation, empowerment and change (Ayob, Teasdale and Fagan, 2016).

The paper begins with an exploration of social action and social innovation, followed by an overview of the existing literature on pro-poor tourism. There then follows a focus on how socially innovative tourism approaches like pro-poor tourism can empower the poor, before the paper finishes with a summary of the arguments presented and suggestions for future scholarly (or practitioner) research. A model is developed for how pro-poor tourism can be designed as a social innovation that allows for genuine change in the power imbalances in society, as well as its normative, regulative and cultural practices (Mulgan, 2019; Heiscala, 2007). The paper’s value is therefore in both theoretically distinguishing pro-poor tourism as a means of social innovation, as well as in proposing a research agenda in this area for pro-poor tourism scholars.

* The authors recognise the contention between the concepts of pro-poor tourism and sustainable tourism, and the fact that many view pro-poor tourism as an element within wider sustainable tourism models/approaches.

2. Social Innovation and Empowerment

Max Weber’s (1947) concept of social action explored the restructuring of normative organizational and societal environments, as a means of placing agency back in the hands of actors. By empowering individuals or groups, Weber (ibid) argued that you could allow people to overcome the institutional and cultural barriers to social action that were put in place by those with power. Weber (ibid) argued that empowerment to social action could create systemic shifts in society, and it has been argued that it was the socio-cultural significance of social action that was important to him, as opposed to individual motivations or actions (Munch, 1975). Indeed, whilst social action is inherently tied to an individual’s motivations and intentions, it is also embedded within their socio-cultural environment and the constraints that society and the institutions within society, place on this freedom of action.

When examining innovation more broadly, Hellström (2004) argued that innovation could only be viewed through the lens of social action, and that the process of innovation itself then reshaped both the individuals cognition of social action and their place as a social actor interacting with societal structures/groups. This paper posits that the same can be said for social innovation, given that it as a concept/process is one that is focused on the restructuring of society and power structures (Heiscala, 2007), in a way that ensures that marginalised groups are not left behind and that the benefits of development are shared equitably (OECD, 2022). This has a strong resonance for the pro-poor tourism movement, illustrating the potential relevance of social innovation as an underpinning construct (as will be discussed later).

Social innovation can be argued to be the transformation of normative, regulative and cultural practices (Heiscala, 2007), in order to empower those communities or individuals that are traditionally lacking in power or influence (Mulgan, 2019). The notion of empowerment is a critical one for social innovation, as without this support for disenfranchised communities, the innovation can be argued to have failed (ibid). This is of particular importance when considering pro-poor tourism and its role in supporting communities, as social innovation is viewed as both a global phenomenon and conversely as a localised reaction to such phenomenon (Do and Fernandes, 2020; Roy and Hazenberg, 2019). Further, social innovation can emerge in a variety of forms, emerging out of the public, private or third sectors through government, business or NGO interventions, as well as community initiatives (Murray, Caulier-Grice and Mulgan, 2010).

Social innovation and empowerment are however, not easily aligned concepts, as social innovations can lead to varying types of empowerment. Social innovation can be split into what has been termed the ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ traditions of social innovation, where the former is related to empowerment of individuals, and the latter leads to systemic empowerment and structural changes to underlying inequalities (Ayob et al., 2016; Gallego and Maestripieri, 2022). Whereas weak tradition social innovation sees individuals emerge from social innovation initiatives personally empowered through improved personal utility and traits, such as enhanced self-efficacy (Ayob et al., 2016; Gallego and Maestripieri, 2022), strong tradition social innovations see inter-group collaborations and the restructuring of power relations (Ayob et al., 2016). Indeed, it is suggested that in many ways, social innovation shares many of the features of coproduction, centred on collaboration, ideation, empowerment and change (ibid). With regard to pro-poor tourism, it could be contended (as will be discussed in the next section), that much of the pro-poor tourism seen to date has not adopted genuine coproduction within the models developed, and hence the strong tradition of social innovation, but has at best focused

on individual empowerment that drives individual level benefits.

Therefore, the role of social innovation as an empowering force is critical as part of the solution to driving sustainable development globally and in particular, in those communities around the world that are traditionally underrepresented or lacking in power. For pro-poor tourism, social innovation thus offers a theoretical lens for understanding how it should be implemented and what its overarching aims should be. In part, this has been looked at previously by scholars, albeit they have focused largely on the role of social entrepreneurship (a form of social innovation) on sustainable tourism, or on the role of social innovation in sustainable tourism development. These studies, however, have not taken into account social innovation processes more broadly, nor focused on pro-poor tourism specifically. However, it is clear that if pro-poor tourism initiatives are to succeed, then a focus on the ‘strong tradition’ of social innovation centred on coproduction and empowerment (Ayob et al., 2016; Mulgan, 2019), in order to enable social action (Weber, 1947), would enhance the chances of pro-poor tourism delivering genuine transformation to normative, regulative and cultural practices (Heiscale, 2007).

3. Pro-Poor Tourism

How to fight poverty in developing parts of the world (whether low or middle income countries) has been an ongoing issue for decades, with one mechanism often favoured by development economists in this work and accepted widely as being a tool with which to fight poverty, being tourism (Çolak, Oğuz-Kiper and Kingir, 2023; Luo and Bao, 2019). Indeed, tourism has even featured in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda, particularly with respect to SDG1 No Poverty (albeit also in other areas such as gender equality, education health and wellbeing and reduced inequalities). Tourism is viewed as a useful tool in this area partly because it can make up significant proportions of local economies in developing country contexts (Boonsiritomachai and Phonthanukitithaworn, 2019), and this has led to increased interest in tourism as a tool by scholars, development organisations and governments (Wen et al., 2021).

As was noted earlier, pro-poor tourism as a concept emerged around 25 years ago, as a means to deliver economic, social and environmental benefits to poor communities through sustainable approaches to tourism (Roe and Urquhart, 2001), and in doing so reduce poverty and inequality in impoverished regions (Singh, 2001). Pro-poor tourism aims to improve the connections between the poor communities that are the focus of the development work, and the wider stakeholders promoting and introducing the pro-poor tourism models (Çetin, 2012, cited by Çolak et al., 2023). On this basis, the success of

any pro-poor tourism approach is closely tied to how well connected the stakeholders involved are, and how they are empowered to acquire the resources that they need (Ashley, Roe and Goodwin, 2001) and further, that this stakeholder engagement needs to be built in at conception, not retrofitted later after the expansion of the tourism initiative (Lor, Kwa and Donaldson, 2019). Pang et al. (2024) noted that the success of pro-poor tourism approaches hinges on the community-led element of projects and the role that can be played through education, training and mentoring. This has important implications when exploring pro-poor tourism from the perspective of social innovation, as it is only those social innovations that engage in genuine coproduction and empowerment that seemingly create long-lasting, systemic changes (Ayob et al., 2016).

The benefits of pro-poor tourism can be significant, with the income generated from activities more likely to be reinvested into communities (Wen et al., 2021), whilst pro-poor tourism can be more effective at reducing poverty than donative models of development, and can also build empathy between communities and tourists (Wakasugi and Ito, 2023). Pro-poor tourism can also lead to job creation, wage rises and improved skills through training and education (ODI, 2024; Pang et al., 2024), whilst empowering the poor to gather the resources they require for their own needs and development (Wen et al., 2021). Li et al. (2022) also identified that pro-poor tourism approaches encouraged tourists to pay more, if they could clearly see the money would go to poor individuals or families. The whole notion of pro-poor tourism with its focus on being ‘pro-poor’, also helps politically in centralising the notion of poverty in sustainability debates (Roe and Urquhart, 2001), albeit this is a double-edged sword if the pro-poor tourism initiatives do not substantially reduce poverty.

Critiques of tourism as a means of poverty reduction are commonplace. Whilst the potential benefits of tourism more generally have been identified as directly reducing poverty, improving access to goods/services, increased employment and better access to education and healthcare, the negative effects have included increased social costs locally, unequal investment power, social isolation, migration away from communities, and long hours and/or low pay (Çolak et al., 2023). When focused on pro-poor tourism more specifically, scholars have noted that whilst the idea of supporting poor communities in developing countries through sustainable tourism was noteworthy, as a concept it did not really build on community tourism models sufficiently, and lacked theoretical distinctness (Harrison, 2008). As the impact on poverty itself was unclear, then the whole term ‘pro-poor’ could also be considered misleading (ibid). There has also been critique that the evaluations of the impacts of pro-poor tourism have been too focused on economic benefits, without balancing these alongside the social and environmental impacts that growth in tourism can have on a locale (Spenceley, 2022). It has also been argued that pro-poor tourism does not offer

a complete solution to poverty (Çolak et al., 2023), even though it can often be presented as a singular solution in poor communities.

The impact of pro-poor tourism is also unclear at larger geographic levels, where even if the local benefits are recognised as valid, the wider impact on poverty at regional and country levels is not understood (Oviedo-García, González-Rodríguez and Vega-Vázquez, 2019). Global challenges like the Covid-19 pandemic have also illustrated the challenges in building poverty reduction strategies around tourism, as the lack of resilience to travel restrictions can leave disadvantaged communities highly vulnerable to losses of income (Spenceley, 2022). Further, there is a paucity of research on how pro-poor tourism develops and what the impacts, successes and barriers can be in later, more mature stages of development (Wen et al., 2021). This is now slowly being overcome as new methodologies for assessing the impact of tourism on poverty are being developed, linked to global frameworks like the UN SDG agenda and specifically SDG1: No Poverty and SDG8: 8: Decent work and economic growth (Spenceley, 2022).

What is clear is that pro-poor tourism has the potential to support poverty reduction strategies in disadvantaged communities, through a process of empowerment, if this is approached in the right manner and from the very early stages of the initiatives development. It is the assertion of the current paper that the adoption of pro-poor tourism as a form of social innovation, and the embedding of key social innovation principles within the delivery of pro-poor tourism models (in particular coproduction and co-creation), can lead to much more impactful pro-poor tourism interventions in disadvantaged communities globally. It is this that we identify as ‘socially innovative tourism’ and it is intrinsically related to concepts of community-centred development and sustainable livelihoods.

4. Community-Centered Development (Co-Creation) with Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA)

A pro-poor approach to tourism development aims to support poverty alleviation by empowering marginalized communities to engage in the creation of tourism products and actively participate in decision-making processes (Scheyvens, 2007). Interestingly, tourism is often seen as a viable development strategy because underdeveloped communities typically possess cultural or natural assets that can be leveraged for tourism. Recognizing these assets is a key initial step in community empowerment and poverty alleviation, with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA) serving as a useful tool for this purpose. The SLA serves as a dynamic framework that emphasizes the changes and adaptations people make to their livelihood strategies to navigate challenging conditions

(Shen et al., 2008). Early work on the SLA outlined five key assets essential to livelihoods: natural, human (Nyaupane et al., 2019), physical (Gascón, 2017, p. 974), financial (Mitchell and Ashley, 2010), and social capital (Tao and Wall, 2009). In the context of global tourism, Cater and Cater (2007) added cultural capital, encompassing heritage, customs, and traditions. Wang et al. (2010) later introduced political capital to address governance and power dynamics in community-based tourism, highlighting its influence on all other forms of capital.

For marginalized communities and pro-poor tourism, the Community-Centered Development (Co-Creation) approach, integrated with the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA), highlights the pivotal role of community-driven initiatives. This framework emphasizes equitable economic distribution, social innovation, and environmental sustainability. It advocates for tourism as a means to enhance the well-being of disadvantaged groups by fostering responsible, inclusive practices that deliver mutual benefits to both communities and the environment. Through this approach, tourism becomes a transformative tool, empowering local communities while ensuring long-term sustainability and shared prosperity. In this way SLA and Community-Centered Development (Co-Creation) have coproduction at the centre of their activities, a facet that is of fundamental importance in the delivery of social innovation and the empowerment of others, as will now be explored.

5. Socially Innovative Tourism to Empower the Poor

The role of empowerment as a means to combat poverty, is by no means a new idea, with several leading scholars and international agencies promoting it over the years. Indeed, the concept of empowerment in reducing poverty has been promoted by the OECD (2012) as a core mechanism of driving pro-poor growth, designing aid instruments, and enabling social action and self-help. The World Bank back in 2007 identified six key indicators of empowerment in poverty reduction, including psychological, informational, organisational, material, financial and human (World Bank, 2007). Further, Eberlei (2007) identified ‘powerlessness’ as a major cause of poverty, and one that could only be eradicated through the empowerment of communities. The UN’s Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) has also identified empowerment as a key means for delivering poverty reduction or alleviation. The role of empowerment is therefore clearly understood, but as has been identified earlier in the paper, the impact of tourism approaches to poverty reduction are inconclusive at best, if not negative overall, and so the question to be asked is therefore how tourism, and specifically pro-poor tourism, can be utilised to empower communities and therefore reduce poverty?

Whilst the literature around social innovation and pro-poor tourism is limited, there has been some work on social entrepreneurship and pro-poor tourism, as well as social innovation and sustainable tourism more widely. For example, Zeng (2018) explored the role of social enterprise and social entrepreneurship (SEE) in pro-poor tourism in Taiwan, identifying that the success of SEE tourism models lay partly in their commitment to socio-cultural missions, as well as economic development, with shared resources, profit sharing and wide participation in activities critical. Castro-Spila et al. (2018) also explored the development of social innovation and sustainable tourism models through a laboratory style model, identifying that vulnerability identification was critical to success (and the creation of impact) but also noting that the place-based nature of social innovations in locales meant that wider scaling of impact and/or change could be difficult. Booyens (2022) also identified that many tourism focused SEEs operated at the micro-level and struggled to achieve wider impacts beyond the individual level, something that relates back to the earlier discussions around weak versus strong tradition social innovation. Further, Booyens (ibid) argues that it is local community participation, active modes of inclusion, and agency in social systems that remain crucial to promoting social innovation in sustainable tourism.

What has been clear from the review of the literature conducted in this paper and the synthesis of the ideas presented, is that there remain many uncertainties as to the impacts of pro-poor tourism beyond impact at the individual level. Indeed, if one is to conceptualise pro-poor tourism as a social innovation based upon the evidence gathered to date on the efficacy of pro-poor tourism, then at best the terms can be viewed as a ‘weak tradition’ social innovation (Ayob et al., 2016). The authors posit that such social innovation approaches lack the ability to truly empower communities, nor to drive the wider systemic change to normative, regulative and cultural practices that are indicative of transformational social innovation approaches (Heiscale, 2007). For pro-poor tourism to be truly impactful and to generate systemic shifts in poverty reduction and inequality, initiatives need to engage in the principles of ‘strong tradition’ social innovation, embedded within concepts of collaboration, ideation, empowerment and change (Ayob et al., 2016), and to be truly community-led. Such coproduction models will allow communities to direct the benefits of the tourism generated (i.e. income) to both families but also community initiatives that can improve the socio-cultural environments (and ensure that negative environmental impacts are not experienced). Such a model would provide genuine empowerment for local communities (Mulgan, 2019), that would facilitate wider social action that could ultimately lead to the refiguring of power structures (Weber, 1947; Heiscale, 2007), and hence generational shifts in poverty and income inequality. These approaches could then perhaps help to overcome the wider critiques of pro-poor tourism that have justifiably been made in the academic literature (for example: Harrison, 2008; Oviedo-García et al., 2019; Spenceley, 2022; Çolak

et al., 2023). Figure 1 below details our model for social innovation mechanism for pro-poor tourism.

6. Summary and Limitations

The paper has presented an overview of social innovation and pro-poor tourism as a means to synthesise the two concepts in order to illustrate how pro-poor tourism approaches could be made more impactful and sustainable. The arguments made illustrate that for pro-poor tourism to be truly transformative in reducing poverty and benefiting local communities economically, socially and environmentally (whilst also preserving culture), a ‘strong tradition’ social innovation approach needs to be adopted in creating new pro-poor tourism (or sustainable tourism) initiatives (Ayob et al., 2016). In so doing, the paper has sought to illustrate the need for collaboration, ideation, empowerment and change in pro-poor tourism approaches, with such initiatives also genuinely led by local communities through a process of coproduction. It is such an approach to pro-poor tourism that may enable the approach to finally demonstrate that it can genuinely reduce poverty and create lasting structural change in society (or at least be a mechanism toward such change), by empowering local communities to believe that they can refigure their world by engaging in social action. Here, socially innovative tourism, alongside SLA and the development of sustainable livelihoods, means that pro-poor tourism approaches could enable genuine change and sustainability. This ultimately creates a snowball effect for impact in which power structures shift and further change is enabled.

Perhaps one of the strongest reasons as to why socially innovative pro-poor tourism could be impactful in poverty reduction, resides in the fact that whilst globalisation has generated unprecedented wealth, it has also exacerbated localised poverty and left some communities more vulnerable (Çolak et al., 2023). However, one of the tenets of social innovation is that whilst a global phenomenon itself (and in some ways a product of globalisation), it does provide a mechanism for empowerment that can support communities to react to these negative influences (Roy and Hazenberg, 2019). The model presented in this paper, along with the review of the pro-poor tourism literature and embedding within a social innovation approach centred on social action, has identified how pro-poor tourism could be made more impactful in poverty reduction. For this to happen though, the principles of social innovation and empowerment to social action, need to be utilised when creating future pro-poor tourism initiatives. This has important implications for scholars, practitioners and policy-makers/funders, when seeking to understand how sustainable tourism initiatives can be utilised within wider development initiatives.

Further Research Opportunities

The findings and arguments made within this review paper, are limited by the theoretical nature of the arguments and their embedding within the wider literature.

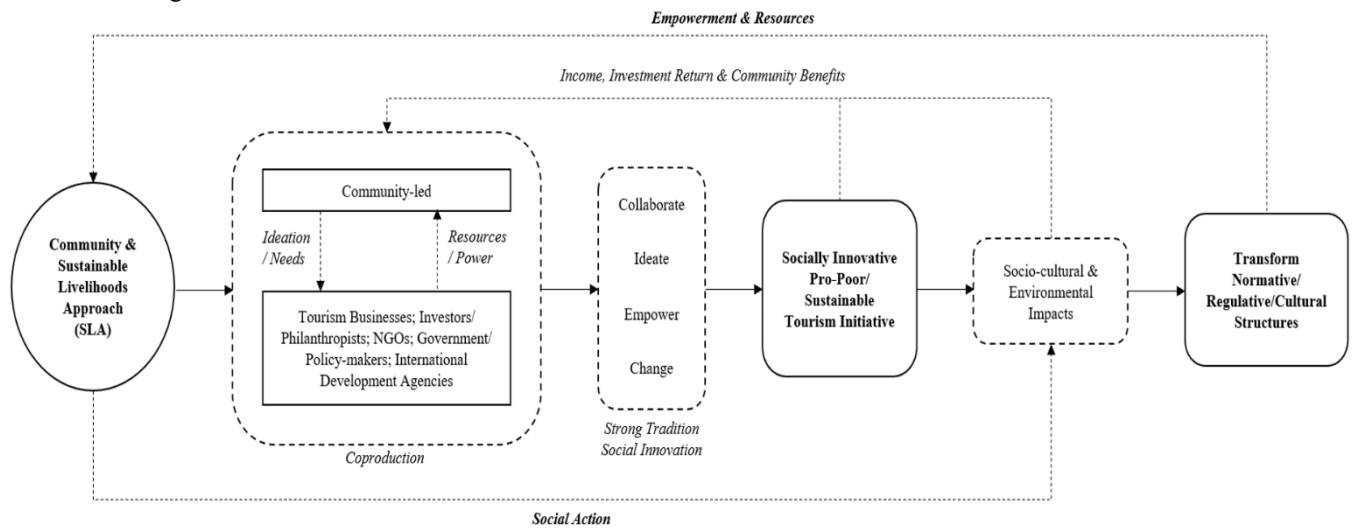


Figure 1. Social Innovation Mechanisms for Pro-Poor Tourism

However, the model and arguments presented do offer avenues for further research by scholars, in order to test the assumptions made. There are also implications for practitioners and other stakeholders involved in the establishment of pro-poor tourism initiatives, in order to ensure that they are impactful from the start. These questions/implications include:

1. Where pro-poor tourism approaches can be identified that align with the principles of 'strong tradition' social innovation, does this lead to greater impact or systemic changes?
2. How do local communities view pro-poor tourism initiatives themselves and what barriers do they see to engagement?
3. Can existing pro-poor tourism initiatives be shown to have led to wider structural changes in community power structures and/or empowerment of traditionally disadvantaged groups?
4. What are the challenges to embedding coproduction principles in pro-poor tourism approaches, most notably collaboration, ideation, empowerment and change?

There are of course more questions that could emerge from pro-poor tourism initiatives that embed social innovation at their core, and other avenues of research that scholars may identify from the arguments made in this paper. Social innovation can also offer a rich seam for understanding the application of sustainable tourism models more generally, and inform their design in order to ensure that they generate sustainable development for communities.

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