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Tourism Initiatives Developed Through Collaboration with Foreign Organizations: The Emergence of Responsible Practices in Cuba

ABSTRACT

This study concerns tourism initiatives by foreign organizations and their contributions to the emergence of responsible tourism in Cuba. Using the framework of Community Benefit Tourism Initiatives, this study investigates the local actors' and the foreign organizations' perspective on responsible tourism, the processes of planning and developing tourism initiatives, their implementation and the effects on the local communities. The empirical part concerns a case study about an initiative originated from a cultural development project by an Italian D-NGO and developed through the collaboration with an Italian tour operator. The findings suggest that, even in the case where such initiatives aren't strategically planned and start with a limited participation of local actors, they can lead to important benefits for the local communities. The findings also suggest that these types of initiatives can constitute a solid basis for future developments with an increasing active participation by the local actors.

Keywords: responsible tourism, local community participation, D-NGO, Cuba

1. Introduction

This study concerns responsible tourism in Cuba. The focus is on the emergence of relevant initiatives by foreign organizations who involve and collaborate with local actors. The overall purpose is to investigate how the meaning and practice of responsible tourism emerge from the interactions of local and foreign actors. The research questions are: what is the local actors' and the foreign organizations' representatives' perspective on responsible tourism? To what extent and how are such perspectives discussed and negotiated? What are the effects on the local tourism practices and the local communities?

Due to its rich natural and cultural heritage, Cuba has the potential to develop high-quality and competitive tourism (Babb, 2011; Hingtgen, Kline, Fernandes, & McGehee, 2015; Simon, 1995). Three additional aspects can be mentioned as relevant to tourism development. One is the recent governmental support in developing the tourism sector as an attempt to promote a positive image of the country and a sustainable development for the local economies (Elliott & Neirotti 2008; Jayawardena, 2003; Laitamaki et al., 2016; Sanchez & Adams, 2008; Spencer, 2010; VI Congress of Communist Party, 2011).

Another aspect relevant to the development of high-quality and competitive tourism is what is sometimes referred to with the terms *resolver* and *inventar* (to resolve a problem or a situation, to find a creative solution). This can be described as the Cubans' attitude and capacity to face daily challenges using their social network and personal skills, and can be related to some personal traits typical of entrepreneurs (Sanchez & Adams, 2008; Swedberg, 2009). Finally, the third aspect potentially relevant to tourism development is the experiential approach to tourism that seems to be applied more or less explicitly in the promotion of several activities (Babb, 2011).

Despite these potentials, some factors can hamper the tourism developmental process, such as the poor condition of the infrastructure, the challenging entrepreneurial climate and the lack of experience in relation to operating in a complex service sector (de Holan & Philipps, 1997; Font & Jancsics, 2016; Hingtgen et al., 2015; Simon, 1995). Moreover, some elements characterizing the Cuban tourism sector can compromise the potential benefits, in particular: the low return visit rates, the high dependence on low-cost packages and a small market (Babb, 2011; Elliott & Neirotti 2008; Sanchez & Adams, 2008; Taylor & McGlynn, 2009). Another factor relevant to tourism development concerns some cases where the presence of tourists has led negative impacts, such as a marked class divide between those working in contact with foreign tourists and those having other jobs, small criminality, corruption and prostitution (Taylor & McGlynn, 2009; Babb, 2011).

Although international collaboration is object to some restrictions due to the European Common Position on Cuba and tourism is not included among the possible collaborative fields, collaboration with foreign organizations and local communities could contribute to the emergence of responsible tourism practices. In her book *Development Tourism: Lessons from Cuba*, Spencer studies some educational tours run by NGOs (2010). The author notes that such tours can have impacts on the local communities well beyond the economic realm, and calls for more studies to explore this, and in particular the Cubans' perspective on such tours.

This study aims to answer this call. It uses the concept of Community Benefit Tourism Initiative to frame responsible tourism initiatives by foreign organizations, viewing such

initiatives as platforms where responsible tourism practices emerge (Simpson, 2008; Wearing & McDonald, 2002). The empirical part concerns a case study about a cultural tourism initiative in the recently established province of Mayabeque. This initiative is developed by two Italian organizations, a D-NGO and a tour operator.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Responsible Tourism

Responsible tourism can be described as a form of tourism that provides holiday experiences for ethically oriented tourists and benefits to the hosting communities (Frey & George, 2010; Grimwood, Yudina, Muldoon & Qiu, 2015). Focusing on the latter aspect, it can be specified that the term denotes tourism planning and development processes that aim to contribute to the quality of life of the destination communities (Timothy, 2012; Moscardo & Murphy, 2015). In this context, several potential benefits are identified. This study considers such benefits grouped as follows: tangible improvements, empowerment and experience. Tangible improvements can include the conservation of the natural and cultural built heritage, the restoration or building of infrastructures and facilities. Tangible improvements also concern the destination communities' physiological and security needs, such as access to drinkable water and food.

With regard to empowerment, responsible tourism can lead to benefits in relation to the sense of power that the local communities feel in relation to their lives and future (Scheyvens, 1999; Timothy, 2012). Responsible tourism contributes to the emergence of formal and informal business opportunities that can be complementary to already existing economic activities. Within the communities, various individuals and groups, including women and youngsters, can perceive that, through tourism, they can become economically independent from others. Economic empowerment is then strictly linked to social and political empowerment. Psychological empowerment relates to the collective and individual self-esteem and is an aspect that can be particularly critical in the case of cultural tourism (Haywood, 1988).

The third group of benefits that this study recognizes as potentially important in relation to responsible tourism concerns the experiential aspect of tourism. This element can be described as the hedonic and the educational value that local communities can experience in meeting people, establishing friendships or acquaintance relationships across borders (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016). With regard to this, the social interactions between the hosting communities and the tourists play a central role. In the case of Cuba, this seems to be in conflict with what is sometimes referred to as "apartheid". For many years the position of the Cuban government in this regard has been to attempt to keep the tourists and the Cubans as separated as possible in order to protect the tourists from possible criminal activities, and the Cubans from the possible contagious effect of consumerism (Taylor & McGlynn, 2009). Recently, this approach to tourism has been commented on as concerning only specific areas, for example the historical urban areas of La Habana (Rettinger & Wójtowicz, 2014).

2.2. Community Participation in Tourism Planning and Development

A key factor relevant to responsible tourism planning and development broadly discussed in the literature is community participation (Bramwell & Lane, 2011; Lea, 1988; Murphy, 1988; Prentice, 1993; Simmons, 1994). The involvement of the hosting communities in tourism development is considered important for the actual realization of the potentials in terms of community benefits—both from a democratic point of view and a practical one—as a solution to failed top-down processes. In this context, different levels of participation are identified, from a total absence of participation where the local communities are ignored and sometimes manipulated by external actors, to a complete participation and control (Marzuki & Hay, 2013; Moscardo & Murphy, 2015; Okazaki, 2008; Rocha, 1997).

While some studies suggest that the highest levels of participation are desirable, some scholars argue that there can be certain situations where the full participation of the destination communities might compromise the developmental process (Emory & Flora, 2006; Moscardo, 2008; Moscardo & Murphy, 2015; Okazaki, 2008; Salazar, 2012; Taylor, 1995; Tosun, 2000). This depends on factors that are specific to each context and usually includes: the heterogeneity of the communities, the existence of internal power relations and external influences, the local lack of physical, financial and political capital, and an underdeveloped community capacity. The latter is described as a combination of a lack of awareness of the possible negative effects of tourism, false expectations, limited or poor knowledge of the tourism sector and markets, limited experience about planning and business.

2.2.1. Community benefit tourism initiatives

Among the approaches to community participation developed on the basis of the considerations presented above is the Community Benefit Tourism Initiative (CBTI) (Simpson, 2008). The CBTI framework highlights the possibility to overcome possible contextual limitations with the involvement of competent and committed stakeholders. This is in line with the idea that partnerships with actors who are able to assist the local communities are desirable (Jamal & Getz, 1995; Murphy, 1988).

The CBTI framework emphasizes the role of possible partners, in particular private businesses, governmental agencies and NGOs. An active private sector and its participation in the initiative is considered important, especially in the case of tour operators as these might have the resources that the small entrepreneurs usually operating in tourism lack. The governmental agencies at different levels and the NGOs are also considered important stakeholders and partners, and their roles, sometimes overlapping, include for example: capacity building and skills transfer, investments, consultancy and marketing.

With regard to NGOs and more—in general foreign—actors involved in the initiative, the CBTI framework identifies some problems that might arise, in particular: attitudes, actions and accusation of neo-colonialism, lack of understanding of the community needs and of the market, and disparate opinions within the partners' group. Such problems can be faced in various ways, and some of the solutions proposed concern the establishment of structured and transparent communication channels and methods, awareness and information campaigns and collaboration with the local private sector. These actions are also among the more generic components of the best practices identified and grouped in: interaction, transparency, analysis/evaluation, practicalities and skills.

In relation to possible accusations of neo-colonialism, Wearing & McDonald (2002) observe that this issue can be framed in terms of relations of power where different worldviews meet. The authors comment on the relations of power in tourism and discuss the challenging role of the tour operators and development agents in facilitating the development of hosting communities through tourism, without imposing their own perspectives and methods. In their view, power relations are essentially knowledge confrontations that produce reality and, in the context of tourism, the traditionally used frame of neo-colonialism might tend to underestimate such a relational aspect, relying on the seldom-problematized roles of dominant and passive actors. In line with such a position, collaborative projects where various partners interact become the place where different perspectives are visible and can be challenged.

Based on these considerations, it is here proposed that CBTIs can be viewed as the platforms where destination communities and foreign organizations develop responsible tourism practices, negotiating the various relevant aspects. This is illustrated in figure 1.

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Figure 1. The CBTI illustrated as a circle representing a collaborative platform for local communities and foreign NGOs.

The circle represents the CBTI collaborative platform. Dialogue between the local community and the foreign NGOs concerns the three elements of potential risks, potential benefits and best practices. Dialogue and interactions are illustrated in the centre as this element and, more specifically, those interactions concerning the foreign and local actors' perspectives on the specific CBTI and on responsible tourism in general are crucially important.

3. Method

This research uses a case study and our approach to it can be qualified as dialogical (Rule & John, 2015). According to such approach, we view theory, practice and research as interrelated and recursive situated processes through which theory guides the research and can be influenced by insights from practice and new findings. In line with this, our purpose is to apply and eventually modify the CBTI framework in relation to the specific context (responsible tourism in Cuba through international cooperation) and generate new insights and working solutions.

The investigated case concerns a tourism product developed and managed by two Italian organizations, the D-NGO COSPE Onlus and the cultural association and tour operator Planet Viaggi Responsabili (Planet Responsible Travels). Such a product consists of organized tours, which include the usual Cuban tourist attractions, as well as a visit by the participants to the development project "Punto Cubano" in the Mayabeque province. As mentioned in the Introduction, this case is similar to those investigated by Spencer (2010) and can be qualified as potentially very important in terms of positive effects on the local communities.

This case can be viewed as an extreme case chosen on the basis of its “key-ness” and the researchers’ familiarity with the specific context and project (Yin, 1994; Thomas, 2011). The tourism product originates from a development project by COSPE and some Italian and Cuban organizations. In the final phase of this project, a tourism component was added through the collaboration with the tour operator Planet Viaggi Responsabili. The extreme aspect of the case is identified by this origin of the project, which implies the secondary role of tourism-related objectives. In this sense, the addition to the original project of a tourism component is here viewed as a CBTI, where the central focus is clearly on the benefits for the hosting communities and tourism is used as one of the tools in order to achieve such benefits. This aspect explains the “key-ness” of the specific case in relation to its capacity to exemplify the analytical object of inquiry, the CBTI framework.

With regard to the familiarity with the case, the researchers have a deep understanding and knowledge of the Cuban context and the “Punto Cubano” project. This is something that have influenced the selection of the case as well as the data collection. One of the researchers has worked for 10 years as country director and project coordinator for COSPE in Cuba, and is now a consultant for monitoring and evaluation of the projects. She is a key informant with a good understanding and knowledge of the process of development and management of collaborative projects in Cuba. She has paid several visits to the communities of Mayabeque. She is also an important door-opener and facilitator for gaining access to various data sources. Additional data, both secondary and primary, were collected for the specific purpose of this study.

In line with the importance attached to the context within the CBTI framework, the first phase of the data collection aimed to gain in-depth understanding of the development project from which the tourism initiative originated and the broader context relative to the Mayabeque province. The attention was then directed to the tourism initiative, more precisely to the following aspects:

- the involvement of the local people in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the tourism initiative,
- the interactions between the Italian and the local actors,
- the effects of the tourism initiative,
- the involved actors’ perspective on future developments.

During the data collection more generic aspects about tourism in Cuba and the possible collaboration between Cuban communities and organizations and foreign organizations were also investigated. This was done by asking direct questions in the case of the organizations’ representatives, while in the case of the local community the questions were indirect, using the specific tourism initiative as an example.

Primary data were collected through interviews with representatives of COSPE and Planet Viaggi Responsabili (project managers) and the tourism initiative coordinator in Mayabeque. The latter also played an active role in the data collection preparation and numerous conversations about the content of the research took place with the researchers. A survey was conducted among the members of the local communities involved. Such a survey was based on a written questionnaire handed out by the initiative coordinator who assisted in the compilation and complemented the data collection with supplementary questions when necessary. Fifteen people participated in the survey: seven students, three students’ family

members (parents, older sister), one teacher, one member (musicologist) of the Centre for Research and Development of Cuban Music and three members (director and workers) of the local Casa de la Décima. The latter is the local recreational centre run by a cultural association arranging improvisation-related events and activities for the community. Table 1 summarizes the sources of the primary data. Secondary data were collected online and provided by the representatives of the two organizations.

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Table 1. The type of respondents to the interviews and survey.

The data, categorised on the basis of the four aforementioned aspects, were analysed using the theoretical framework illustrated in fig. 1. The data were interpreted and contextualised and, in this phase, the familiarity of one of the researchers with the local context was essential. During the whole research process, from the theoretical framework developmental phase to the discussion of the findings, the close collaboration between the researchers, who have different professional backgrounds, and the local initiative coordinator have ensured the quality of the study.

4. Findings

4.1. The Mayabeque Province and the “Punto Cubano” Development Project

COSPE Onlus is an Italian private D-NGO founded in 1983 with the purpose of promoting sustainable development opportunities for the populations located in various countries, among which is Cuba. COSPE bases its approach on projects that aim for the valorization of the local communities’ resources and its approach is based on the active participation of the local people.

Among the COSPE development projects is “The *punto cubano* and other rural traditions: Rescue and diffusion in the new province of Mayabeque”. In 2011 Mayabeque, a rural area characterized by transculturation (the merging and converging of Aboriginal, Hispanic, Yucatecan, Canary, African and Chinese cultures (Ortiz, 1995)), was established as a province. One of the major challenges for the new province was related to the promotion of an economic, social and cultural development beneficial for all the inhabitants of the area.

In this context, the various rural traditions and activities were identified as potentially important contributors. Among these is the art of oral improvised poetry (*décima*). This art arrived in Cuba in the middle of the eighteenth century from Spain, converging with the island costumes and becoming a reference of the *guateques* (traditional rural parties) of that period. At the end of the nineteenth century, the municipalities that are now part of the Mayabeque province already counted more than 50 poets. At the beginning of the 1980s, these poets contributed considerably to enrich the cultural level and the vocabulary of the population. From this context emerged the *punto cubano*, the main cultural expression of farmers throughout Cuba.

For a long time, the *punto cubano* has been used to celebrate harvesting, birthdays, patriotic and cultural anniversaries. Due to the economic and technological development of

Cuban society, where the spaces of recreation have often become dominated by foreign artistic expression, the practice of the *punto cubano* has diminished over the years. This has contributed to the creation of stereotypes distant from the native culture, affecting the transmission of the local cultural heritage to the youth of the country.

In this context, a group of Cuban and Italian organizations joined together and developed the “Punto Cubano” project. The idea of the project originated from the *XIV International Fair Cubadisco 2010*, organized by the Cuban Institute of Music and especially dedicated to rural music. As a result of this event, the following organizations joined COSPE to develop a cultural project centred on the *punto cubano*: the Association Giano Produzioni (an Italian association of artists), the CIDVI (the Ibero-American Centre for *Décima* and improvised verse), the CIDMUC (the Centre for Research and Development of Cuban Music) and the ANAP (the National Organization of Small Farmers).

Financed by European funds, the project began in 2011 and ended in 2015. The “Punto Cubano” project had the objective of strengthening the process of shaping the cultural identity of Mayabeque through the collaboration of governmental agencies, private actors and lay people. The project included various activities: the implementation of workshops for the local youngsters, the recuperation of traditional oral knowledge, especially by the elderly, and the facilitation of exchange programmes for a local theatre company. The project evaluation concludes that the project was able to strengthen the presence of traditions in people’s life, adding an important cultural aspect to the daily life of farmers, and thus engaging people in a positive change in terms of the capacity to generate and pass these values along to new generations.

4.2. The Italian Organizations and Their Approach to Tourism Development in Cuba

A tourist component was added to the “Punto Cubano” development project in 2015. This was done through the collaboration between COSPE and Planet Viaggi Responsabili. The latter is an Italian tour operator established in 1999. It is also a cultural association and a member of the AITR (Italian Association of Responsible Tourism). Based on the AITR principles, Planet Viaggi Responsabili understands responsible tourism as a form of tourism in line with social and economic justice and in respect of the natural environment and the local cultures.

For several years, COSPE and Planet Viaggi Responsabili have collaborated in the development of responsible tourism itineraries in Cuba. In 2015, such collaboration was formalized in a written agreement where their relative roles are clarified. According to this, COSPE is responsible for the identification of possible tourism itineraries, the participation in their development and promotion, and the identification of a coordinator. On the other hand, Planet Viaggi Responsabili is responsible for the development of the tourism packages, the travel logistics, the remuneration of the on-site personnel, the promotion of the tourism packages and of the fund-raising campaign for COSPE.

The perspectives of COSPE and Planet Viaggi Responsabili in relation to tourism development and the involvement of external organizations are quite aligned. Both organizations’ representatives view the assistance that the local communities can offer through the collaboration with foreign organizations as important on the condition that the

latter are focused on responsible tourism development. The COSPE initiative coordinator comments on this issue as follows:

The development of tourism at any level should be linked internationally. International organizations that have the capacities can be an important element. For example: they can be important to implement pilot experiences, transmit good practices and connect with other actors.

The tour operator representative also comments on the reciprocal benefits implicit in such collaboration from a tourism business point of view, exemplifying as follows:

I think that the collaboration with foreign organizations is important for the development of tourism, the creation of a sort of synergy aiming to conserve the cultural heritage of Cuba. (...) for Cuba this is a matter of strengthening the local identity, and for the foreign organizations it is a matter of having the possibility to sell a unique product. For example: there are many places with a beautiful sea but Cuba gives me the opportunity to sell the sea and the uniqueness of the island ...the Cuban culture and atmosphere.

The COSPE representatives list several critical factors for a responsible tourism development in rural Cuba. These include: the limited entrepreneurial climate due to the governmental control of tourism activities, the lack or scarcity of infrastructures, the limited professionalism and experience in terms of tourism businesses and the existence of false expectations.

Focusing on the peculiar challenges that foreign organizations could face, the representatives of the two Italian organizations recognize the possibility of being accused of neo-colonialism, and possible problems due to different objectives and working methods. These challenges are met by identifying collaborative partners that have the same view on tourism development and using actively local people as communication facilitators and coordinators of the various activities.

4.3. The Planning and Implementation of the “Punto Cubano” CBTI

The tourism product added to the “Punto Cubano” development project consists of the inclusion in a tourist package dedicated to Cuba of a visit to the province of Mayabeque and, more specifically, an encounter with the students enrolled in the *punto cubano* workshops and their teachers.

This tourism product was developed mainly by Planet Viaggi Responsabili consulting COSPE in order to organize the visits to local communities and to have a local coordinator. The local people, more specifically those involved in the development project, were informed about the possibility of receiving visits from the tourists. They agreed and acted in quite an enthusiastic way with regards to the possibility of meeting foreign tourists. Both the data from the Italian organizations’ representatives and from the survey report and show this enthusiasm.

The data suggest then that the active participation of the local community in the tourism initiative is limited to the implementation phase and is also limited to a selected group of people, including families with children and youngsters and teachers. This is explained by the Italian organizations’ representatives, both in Italy and in Cuba, by the fact that the

initiative was not planned, and such an opportunity emerged only at the end of the developmental project.

Although not actively involved in the planning, the local community was kept informed of the tourism initiative through the initiative coordinator and the local Casa de la Décima. The latter arranged numerous and frequent meetings between its members, the local families and the initiative coordinator. During such meetings, oral discussions and confrontations took place as well as the production and diffusion of written material. The Casa de la Décima was also the main group responsible for the organization of the artistic performance. The interaction between the initiative coordinator and the Casa de la Décima is described as apparently being very good and unproblematic. The initiative coordinator describes the Casa de la Décima as a crucially important collaborative partner:

It (the Casa de la Décima) is an institution that grew during the implementation execution of the initiative. (...) it strengthened and expanded the working relationships, building a clear and direct communication with an important group of institutions at different levels.

The Casa de la Décima also has good relations with the teachers, the students and the students' families and is reported in the survey in particularly positive terms by some students. This is well illustrated by the following quotation: "The Casa de la Décima is the place for everybody. It is part of us and we are part it."

According to the initiative coordinator, the workers of the Casa de la Décima have been very responsible and committed, and this has probably contributed to encouraging the same type of involvement among the students.

From their side, the workers of the Casa de la Décima, including the director, express satisfaction with regard to the initiative, in particular the support they received from it in relation to the expertise of COSPE and the financial help for buying musical instruments. One respondent of this group specifies that the communication with COSPE has been extremely good until the end of the development project and it has contributed, as also commented by other respondents, to the increase in local artistic competence.

4.4. The Results of the "Punto Cubano" CBTI and Future Directions

The "Punto Cubano" tourism initiative is described on the website of Planet Viaggi Responsabili as follows:

A challenge for the local development, a guided participation in the transformative processes, an opportunity for the village residents, a cultural bridge with Italy: this is the travelling experience.

The data suggest that the tourism initiative has succeeded in creating what the quotation reported above qualifies as a "cultural bridge". This is particularly evident in the beneficial effects identified by all respondents, including COSPE, Planet Viaggi Responsabili representatives, the local initiative coordinator, members of the Casa de la Décima, the students and their families.

All respondents indicate the experiential value of the tourism initiative and in particular its value in terms of cultural experience. The initiative coordinator describes the encounter with the tourists as a different and important occasion for social aggregation across cultures. The students and the students' families also view these encounters in terms of cultural exchange. For example, several respondents use in their answers expressions such as "exchange of traditions" and "interactions with people from different countries". Some students seem to be particularly impressed by this aspect as the following quotations illustrate:

"They (the tourists) show satisfaction in getting to know something new and we are pleased to show what we identify with".

"They (the tourists) are attracted by our culture as a magnetic force".

"(...) we share some of this beautiful magic (art) ".

One respondent, a girl, relates the experiential value to a sort of escapism. She describes the meeting with the tourists and the artistic performance and, more generally, the activities of the Casa de la Décima, with the following words: "The Casa de la Décima is like my family, my home, the place where I can forget any problem and I practise and perform what I like: improvising."

In addition to benefits in terms of experience, many respondents view the value of the tourism initiative in a broader way and often in terms of empowerment. The father of a student relates this explicitly to the phenomenon of transculturation. The vast majority of the respondents highlight in particular the beneficial effects in terms of pride. In particular, it seems that the students feel that their artistic performance, and more generally their culture, is appreciated by people from other countries and this influences their sense of belonging to the local culture and, as the following quotation illustrates, the pride of being carriers of a local tradition: "We are proud that people want to know our culture." In their answers, the students often use expressions such as "our roots", "the defence of our roots", "our cultural heritage" and similar.

The sense of empowerment is commented on by the director of the Casa de la Décima also in terms of giving the local youngsters the opportunity to improve their musical competence, to learn to perform for a public and, consequently, to increase their chances of joining artistic activities in the future, both at the local and national level and abroad.

Among the students' families, two respondents mention economic benefits, and one the tangible benefits in relation to the availability of spaces for cultural and recreational activities. Tangible benefits are reported by the director of the Casa de la Décima in relation to objects, mainly in the form of musical instruments that can be bought through the project and thanks to the extra income from tourism and the didactic material produced for the students that could be of interest to the tourists.

The organizations' representatives report that the economic benefits are limited but will possibly increase in relation to the future developments of the tourism initiative. Commenting on its potentials and future developments, various considerations are made. For example, the local coordinator exemplifies a possibility for the future as follows:

The municipal and provincial governments of Mayabeque, Casa de la Décima, MINCULT and MINTUR can identify and set up tourist routes where there are the *punto cubano* and other peasant traditions.

Among the partners, the Casa de la Décima is named as a possible important partner together with foreign organizations. One respondent suggests that such a structure, with international partners and the local Casas de la Décima as active local partners, should be possible at the national level.

With regard to foreign organizations, the initiative coordinator comments highlighting an important aspect:

...it is necessary to demonstrate the potential of the Cuban point (...). For this reason, international collaboration projects can be a way to study and propose cultural tourism routes. Similarly, the tour operator representative mentions the visibility that international organizations can give to the local culture. International collaboration is then viewed as particularly important to gain attention from the authorities and establish connection with the international markets.

Still with regard to the possibility of future collaboration with foreign organizations, some respondents belonging to the local community are very positive towards the idea. This is mainly the case of the students expressing their belief that art and culture can function as a unifying interest and collaboration platform. One example of such comments is:

If we talk about culture, there are no countries, nor continents, there is only a big family that loves, defends and knows its roots. It is also of interest to other cultures who, if they enjoy it, will defend it like their own.

The artistic aspect of the tourism initiative is also mentioned by some students as having an element that contributes to limiting the possible negativities of the touristic presence. For example:

“When people fight and are interested in culture of this or of other countries, there will be no negative effect. We all follow the same: art!”

“There is no risk of negative effects because art is something positive, as positive as everyone who defends it!”

Two respondents mention that each situation can be different and not all the foreign organizations might have the same interests. One student specifies that foreign organizations involved in local tourism initiative “should be like COSPE”.

The initiative coordinator mentions international collaboration also in relation to joint actions with local authorities and activities to train people and raise awareness in order to plan cultural tourism routes. Concerning this aspect, the tour operator representative comments about future possible changes and the ongoing evaluation of the tourism product. This tends to happen in an informal way and mainly through the tourists’ feedback, while the local community’s perspective is known through the intermediation of the local coordinator. The respondent specifies that the initiative is new and both the local community and the initiative coordinator are gaining a better understanding of what the expectations and the interests of the tourists visiting Mayabeque are, as well as the needs and desires of the local community. The Planet Viaggi Responsabili representative also highlights how the future of the initiative is

dependent on the opportunities that the local people identify and decide to exploit. An example is the possibility of connecting the initiative to other cultural projects and to host tourists for a longer time, offering them accommodation.

5. Discussion

The application of the CBTI concept is used here for analysing the process through which the “Punto Cubano” initiative has developed and the related responsible tourism practices are evolving. In particular, the best practices’ components indicated by Simpson (2008) and the considerations by Wearing and McDonald (2002) about power relations can constitute a fruitful approach in relation to CBTIs acting as platforms where local communities and external actors meet and collaborate.

The findings show that, despite being a new tourism initiative and lacking a strategic plan, the “Punto Cubano” CBTI has led to several and important benefits and these are recognized by the foreign organizations, the local coordinator and the members of the local community. These benefits concern mainly the experiential value of the tourist encounter and the sense of empowerment, especially in terms of self-esteem and pride (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016; Haywood, 1988; Scheyvens, 1999; Timothy, 2012).

The alignment of the actors’ meanings on the type of benefits reached suggest a shared perspective on responsible tourism. Such a shared perspective is at the basis of the collaboration between the two foreign organizations and the data suggest that the same perspective is shared with the local actors. This can be related to the origin of the tourism initiative being an existing development project. As a consequence of this origin, the “Punto Cubano” tourism initiative relies on the results achieved by the development project and it is this project that has acted as a collaborative platform with the local actors. Until now, the investigated CBTI has been used as a collaborative platform in a limited way. Due to this, the initiative has managed only in part to develop the relevant components of the best practices indicated by Simpson (2008), i.e. interaction, transparency, analysis/evaluation, practicalities and skills.

Relying on the five-year work undertaken by COSPE and the other Italian and Cuban organizations through the developmental project, the tourism initiative has not come across any barriers in continuing a relationship with the local community that is characterized by positive interactions, good communication and transparency. Here, the local coordinator and a local organization, the Casa de la Décima, have played and continue to play a central role. It can be proposed that this has contributed to the reinforcement of the already relatively homogeneous understanding and perspective on tourism.

With regard to the other fundamental components of the best practices indicated by Simpson (2008)—evaluation, practicalities and skills—the findings do not show any particular focus in this regard. As to evaluation, this is not formalized and structured as the CBTI best practices indicate. In order for such evaluation to be important in terms of benefits for the local community, an analysis with the regular identification of benefit target areas within the community, as well as environmental and cultural considerations and monitoring

procedures, could be arranged. In this context, the D-NGO could be critically important due to their local expertise. The challenge here is that the working method of projects used by the D-NGO implies an end, and future developments after the end of the project might be compromised by a lack of funds.

Another alternative, commented on explicitly by the tour operator representative and the initiative coordinator, is to use local human resources trained specifically, something that is clearly related to the fourth and last of the best practice components by Simpson (2008). At the moment, no tourism or business training courses are offered to the local community, although this seems to be feasible in relation to the availability of human capital, which was not indicated among the limiting factors for tourism development, and the Cuban experiential approach to tourism and attitude to find creative solutions (Babb, 2011; Sanchez & Adams, 2008). The data indicate that this training could make the local population more aware of possible negativities, an aspect that is indicated as particularly important in the literature and appeared to be not particularly present among the local respondents (Moscardo & Murphy, 2015).

Finally, another element that has emerged from our study is the role of art, in particular music. The local community seems to appreciate the tourists' visits as encounters with people who share the same interest and passion. This can facilitate the emergence of experience value, and, from a managerial perspective, can be viewed in terms of market segmentation.

These considerations are graphically summarised in figure 2. In comparison with figure 1 presented at the end of the theoretical part of this article, a broader view is adopted adding a collaborative "layer". This new element concerns the developmental project to which the investigated CBTI belongs. Moreover, the figure includes segmentation among the best practices, indicating that the interactions between the NGO and the local community should include also a strategic discussion about the type of tourists to target.

-----Figure 2 here -----

Figure 2. The CBTI as part of a developmental project.

6. Conclusion

The focus of this study has been on the development of responsible tourism in Cuba through collaborative initiatives by foreign organizations. This study has applied the Community Benefit Tourism Initiative framework by Simpson (2008) and the considerations by Wearing and McDonald (2002) about power relations to analyse an extreme case. This case concerns two foreign organizations, a D-NGO and a tour operator, with a clear and explicit focus on the potential benefits that the local communities can gain from tourism and a cultural tourism initiative that originates from a development project. This approach has been useful to describe the critically important elements for the development of such an initiative towards a responsible form of tourism.

The findings of the case suggest that the perspectives of the involved actors on tourism are aligned and this provides a solid basis for the development of responsible practices. More precisely, the collaboration among the foreign organizations is based on a clear focus and commitment to the local population and a shared vision on tourism. With regard to the interactions among the foreign and the local actors, the tourism initiative relies on the results achieved by the development project in terms of good communication and transparency, and it is this project that acts as a collaborative platform. The findings also suggest that the local people's and the tourists' interest and passion in culture and art can act as a facilitating element in relation to direct interactions and the related reciprocal experiential value. The latter is found to be particularly important for the local people, together with the benefits in terms of empowerment that the cultural tourism initiative encourages.

From a managerial perspective, it can be suggested that, based on the shared vision of tourism and on already established relations among all the involved actors, the tourism developmental path can include investments in evaluation and training activities. This aspect is emerging and can be relevant in terms of a more active participation by the local actors.

On the basis of these findings concerning responsible tourism in Cuba through international collaboration, it is proposed to include in the CBTI framework a broader view about developmental projects as starting points for tourism initiatives from which the local community can benefit. Moreover, an element that can be included among the CBTI best practices is the discussion among the foreign and local actors about a strategic segmentation of the market.

The findings of this study also suggest that, in the case where tourism initiatives are not strategically planned and start with a limited participation of local actors, they can still lead to important benefits for the local communities and can constitute a solid basis for future developments of responsible tourism practices, with an increasing active participation by the local actors.

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Figures and tables

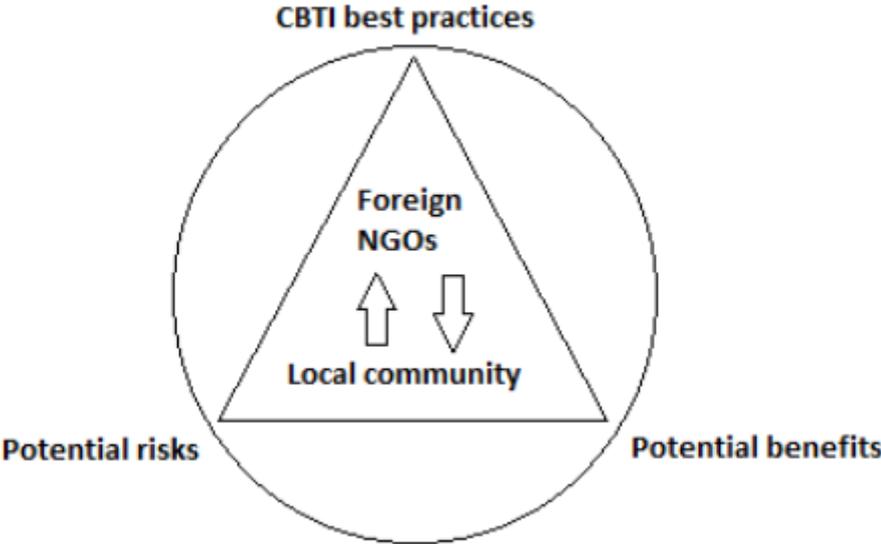


Fig. 1

Tab 1.

Type of respondent (interviews and survey)	
Project managers	2
Local project coordinator	1
Students participating to the project	7
Students' family members	3
Members of the centre R&D Cuban music	1
Member of Casa de la Décima	3
Total respondents	17

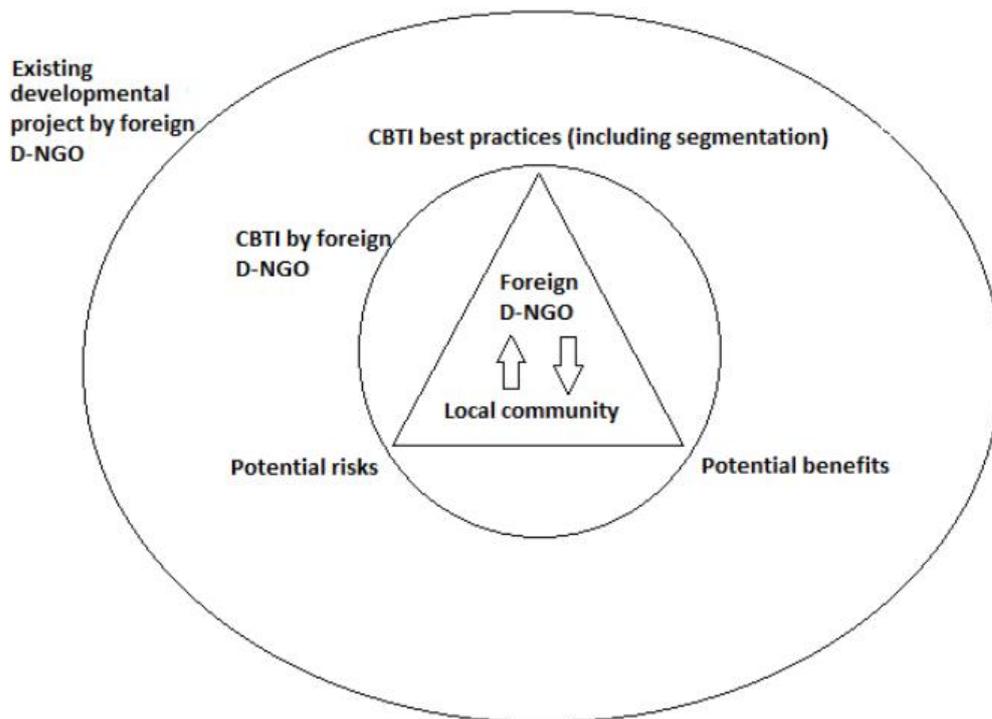


Fig. 2