



Taking "Community" to Task: Integrating Local Participation in Community-based Tourism Research

Abstract:

The fascination with the term "community" by scholars and practitioners is problematic when applied to participatory and community-based development initiatives. Some primary criticisms of this model are that the definition and role of the community is vague and often overstated. This poster discusses the critique in the context of a community-based tourism (CBT) development project in Yucatán, and offers participatory research design as a field method to generate clearer definitions of a community and designate its role in participatory development. The highlighted method is the transect walk, which incorporates local participation in the design and execution of preliminary research.



Ek'Balam, Yucatan:

- Village of 300 Yucatec Maya.
- Proximity to impressive archaeological zone opened in 1994.
- Visitors to the site can climb the structures—a rarity in the area as many of the largest structures at other sites are being closed off due to damage caused by excessive foot traffic.



In response to this influx of tourists, the *ejidatarios*—land owning men—of the village have constructed and opened a community-based tourism (CBT) project, funded mainly by an agency of the federal government. Their project consists of 11 *cabañas* for guest lodging and a main kitchen and dining area. The grounds and structures are lovely and inviting, but the project is only marginally successful at attracting business and has had about 1000 guests in the eight years since they opened.

Participatory Research Methods:

LONGITUDINAL STUDY

...created need for baseline data

TRANSECT WALK

...provided this data as well as other revelatory information

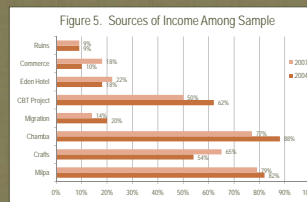
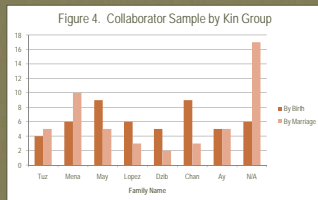
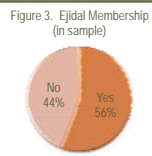
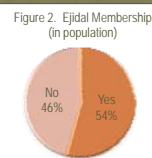
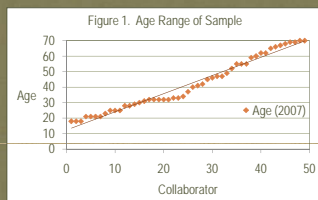
COLLABORATOR SAMPLE

...was formed based on groups identified through the transect walk

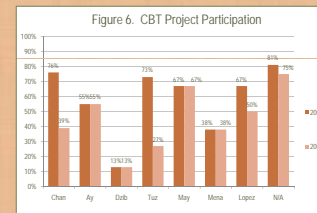
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Collaborator Sample:

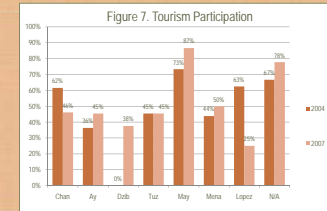


Kin Group Membership and Tourism Participation:



The reported benefits of this project for the community as a whole vary depending on the source of information. While the leaders of the CBT project state that 70 families are receiving economic benefit from the project, I found this number to be greatly exaggerated when actual levels of participation and sources of income were examined. Of the 50 individuals in the sample group, 29 (58 percent) were participating in the CBT project in 2004 but only 23 (46 percent) were still participating three years later. Figure 6 divides levels of participation in the CBT project by kin group, based on data made possible by the transect walk.

Reported sources of income also imply that many families do not have any direct financial benefit from tourism in the village. The average number of individuals living in one household unit is 6.63. Multiplying this number by the 70 families purported to be benefitting from the CBT project gives a product of 464 individuals—more than the entire population of the village. A number that is more realistic for stating economic benefit is 70 individuals, or about 11 households. Figure 7 divides levels of participation in tourism outside of the CBT project by kin group. Families that have relatively high levels of participation in the CBT project also have high levels of interaction with tourism outside of the project.



The domination of community-based projects by elites is especially common in rural areas. This is generally due to the power held by village elites based on their ability to speak with development planners, read project documents, and manage finances. The role of external institutions can exacerbate the elite domination of a project. When project staff from the sponsor agency come to Ek'Balam they deal exclusively with the leaders of the CBT project and the individuals who work there. As their pilot project, they are understandably eager to see it succeed and do not question the actual effects of the project or the sharing of benefits throughout the community.

Conclusions:

Community-based development projects are increasingly important sectors of the funding portfolios of major international donors. The World Bank's funding of such projects rose from \$25 million in 1995 to \$2 billion in 2003, and this continues to be a model favored by development agencies.

I went into the project with the assumption that the participatory nature of this type of project would yield positive engagement of the community as a whole, however I found that the positions of power within the project were held by community members that have a history of occupying roles of authority and members of the community that are marginalized have little or no involvement in the project. While community-based strategies can be successful, the actual benefits are dependent on the internal power structures and the effects that external actors and institutions have on them.

It is the vital role played by these power structures that necessitates local participation in data collection. The definition of the community through the existing ejidal system created a project that benefits only ejidal members and is not based on what residents consider to be their community.