

COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT IN TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN SRI LANKA – A CASE STUDY OF JETWING YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROJECT

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Abstract

Tourism does not exist in silos. Apart from the prominent and active stakeholders, tourism automatically involves the host communities through creation of employment, social growth and infrastructure development in the area. Community empowerment is an essential activity of tourism organisation with sustainability at the forefront of tourism organisational objectives. Tourism Community Empowerment projects are aimed at uplifting the livelihood and improving economical standards of living.

This study attempts to build an understanding of the Tourism Community Empowerment projects conducted by Jetwing Hotels, a top tourism chain in Sri Lanka. The Jetwing Youth Development Project (JYDP) aims to provide a bridge to youth between school life and building a vocational career. The project aims to provide skills in the four hospitality areas; housekeeping, food and beverage, front office and kitchen, and connect the youth with positions to kick start a career in tourism and hospitality.

The study was conducted as a case study by reviewing the objectives of the project with the benefits achieved by employees who have entered through JYDP. Research was conducted by interviewing project organisers and associates of the programme who have crossed the threshold of training and are employed by Jetwing hotels. Findings imply that, it has been successful in providing vocational careers, chances of advancement, economic stability, a range of soft skills and training in the English language; majority are prospects never expected in their lifetimes. It is concluded that community empowerment results in developing living conditions and wellbeing of local people, ensuring the successful achievement of sustainable tourism development. An unforeseen result of JYDP is the knowledge and information of careers in tourism for youth from the host community who had never bet their futures in the hospitality industry.

Key words: Tourism, Hospitality Industry, Community Empowerment, Sustainable Tourism Development, Youth Development

1.0 Background of the study

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) in tourism enhance the need for responsible travel and promote tourism for economic growth, inclusive development and environmental sustainability (UNWTO, 2021). Though the rapid growth in population and cities poses a challenge for sustainable development, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) encourages the implementation of SDG's to maximize the tourism contribution to the socio economic environment. New career and business opportunities, safe and affordable living space and building a resilient economy and society are the objectives of sustainable cities and communities (United Nations Development Programme, 2021). Investment is vital in the form of infrastructure; public transportation, public spaces, urban planning and development to support the public sector. To provide further support, private tourism organisations use community empowerment strategies.

Community engagement through empowerment is essential in meeting contemporary changes in the world and most tourism organisations have linked their sustainability goals to community empowerment projects like the Jetwing Youth Development Project (JYDP).

Jetwing Hotels- Jetwing Youth Development Project (JYDP)

Jetwing Hotels is one of the significant arms of the Jetwing Group; Jetwing Eco Holidays, Jetwing Travels and Jetwing Hotels strives for customer satisfaction with a uniquely personalised service. Founded in 1970 by Mr. Herbert Cooray, Jetwing Hotels Limited is now a world-renowned Sri Lankan hotel chain (Jetwing Hotels LTD, 2021). Currently managed by Mr. Hiran Cooray, the chain owns 38 distinctive hotels and villas throughout the island including one in New Zealand.

All these properties consist of contemporary facilities and provide the best service that suits the modernity, the lifestyle and adopts the latest trends in hospitality. While striving for profitability goals, the chain is committed to a number of sustainable initiatives encouraging the coexistence of both environment and community.

JYDP is a long-term project with the aim of addressing specific needs of the community while capitalizing on the social and economic benefits of sustainable tourism to uplift the livelihood of host communities. The program is a PATA Grand Award Winner that was launched with the pre-opening of 'Jetwing Vil Uyana' in 2006 with farming villages around Sigiriya, targeting school leavers, providing six months training free of charge, on hotel operations, English language, culture, history, etiquette and industry overview (Jetwing Hotels LTD, 2021). The training provided a bridge to a starting hospitality position, with the aligned property, making JYDP a success. This has now expanded to Passikuda, Negombo, Galle and Tissamaharama.

Over the years, JYDP has received recognition from many local and international organisations for the positive impact on the society including PATA Grand Award in Education & Training category in year 2016 and 2007, The Lufthansa City Center Social Award in 2015 and Best Corporate Citizen Sustainability Awards in 2014 (Daily News, 2019).

The purpose of the case study

JYDP is the Jetwing Hotels signature youth development project initiated in 2006, with the aim of empowering the rural youth who are challenged economically, providing quality vocational training at no cost, showing the underprivileged youth from the families, a better way of life (Jetwing Hotels, 2016). All these programs are conducted by qualified trainers including both classroom and on-the-job training.

Under the risk management system of Jetwing Symphony PLC, JYDP is identified as a strategy to reduce the employee risk of attracting and retaining skilled employees that may threaten the operations which will lead to not being able to achieve the planned business objectives and reducing the quality standards resulting reduction in guest satisfaction (Jetwing Symphony PLC, 2019/20). The purpose of the study is to review if the objectives of the project were met benefiting all the stakeholders involved.

2.0 Literature Review

Tourism is one of the major contributors to employment in Sri Lanka where out of 46.6% of employees who are engaged in service sector 11% is represented by the tourism sector with more than 488,000 jobs both direct and indirect (International Labour Organization, 2020). With the steady growth in the industry many people from rural residences can be seen moving into overcrowded cities looking for jobs. JYDP is a good solution given by Jetwing designed to empower rural youth who are underprivileged and do not enjoy higher education. These individuals will be given training in main functions of hotel operation and supplemented by language, communication and soft skills training free of charge and without any employment conditions. The aim of the project is to give youth an opportunity to change their lives and help them to create a better future (Daily FT, 2015) through sustainability.

Community Capacity Building Programs

One major identified way of developing the community is through capacity building which is referred to as an essence of community development by Smith et al. (2001) (Aref & Redzuan, Community Capacity Building for Tourism Development, 2009). These program helps to improve the ability of the community in participating in more collaborative, on-going influential process to develop their skills, knowledge and attitude which can be used in tourism related decision making in long term for the tourism development with the community's participation (Aref & Redzuan, Assessing the Level of Community Participation as a Component of Community Capacity Building for Tourism Development, 2009). According to Aref & Ma'rof (2008) and Marre & Weber (2007) (Aref F. , Redzuan, Gill , & Aref , 2010) without the local participation tourism development in the local community cannot be done successfully (Kaldeen, 2020). Fiona (2007) has recognized capacity building programs as an essential tool to strengthen the wellbeing of the local community and the importance of empowered communities with the participation in tourism activities. The JYDP includes both theoretical and practical lessons to identify the strengths of the individuals and prepare them for a career in the hospitality industry and has conducted for more than 600 youth from 40 different villages for a better life for themselves and families (Jetwing Hotels Sri Lanka, 2021).

Training is designed to involve and support the local community while addressing the nationwide issue of youth unemployment and skilled manpower shortage In the hospitality industry (Business Today, 2012).

Community Empowerment

According to Narayan (2007), empowerment is gaining power to expand authority and control over the resources and the decisions that affect their lives (Camacho, 2020) and it is believed that empowerment is a tool for community development. Through empowerment the poverty could be reduced with reduction in unemployment and inequality as per Cahyono & Putra (2017) and Tolkach & King (2015) (Cahyono, Kurniawan, Sukidin, & Kantun, 2018) with a better economic direction to the community (Honggang , Huang, & Zhang, 2018). Community empowerment is a participatory, people centric process that tries to achieve economic development through social values. Stenier (2016) says that it is a process of giving the ability to be empowered, encouraged and motivated. This needs to be addressed in groups or community-wise to improve the level of the social group that is underdeveloped and trapped with poverty (Cahyono, Kurniawan, Sukidin, & Kantun, 2018).

Through technical and management skills improvement, the organization can achieve higher productivity and that will increase the lifestyle of the community which is also referred to as community economic empowerment (Edwards, 2013). JYDP aims to reduce the gap between the skilled and unskilled employees by equipping them with knowledge in the farming families and in villages like Rangirigama the program was able to completely change the perception on the stereotype misconceptions and attitudes that had in villagers related to hospitality industry (Samuel, 2017).

Sustainable Tourism Organizations through Community Empowerment

The tourism industry in Sri Lanka was facing a skill gap where skilled manpower with right competencies was not available and many employees who had knowledge were moving out of the country for countries such as the Middle-East and Maldives. Unemployment was creating frustration in youth and sometimes causing death.

Sustainable tourism includes pillars of socio-cultural, economic and environmental aspects. As same as the natural environment, the lifestyles of the community, preserving the culture and poverty elimination (Duminduhewa, et al, 2020). Therefore, it is responsible for tourism supporting the improvement of public awareness while developing people capacity according to UNEP (2002) and getting the community as partners in the business organization. Achieving a triple bottom line through social, economic and environmental aspects was also referred to people, planet and profit (Sianipar, et al, 2012; Bandusena, et al, 2020). With this the contemporary business organizations are now looking beyond profit maximization but social responsibility. And for the sustainability of the projects a continuous community commitment and connectedness is needed (Ahmad & Abu Talib, 2014). However, the literature shows very few studies on project sustainability and community empowerment to date.

In the 1- program in Jaffna more than 60 youth from different backgrounds and localities who are ready to share their vibrant culture and customs joined and successfully completed where after the training they were enrolled to Jetwing Jaffna family. This was a relief to the families and the individuals who never had a proper future due to war and with the opportunity given the trainees were more than happy to take up the steps for the reconciliation through career development (Jetwing Hotels Sri Lanka, 2021). Further to sustainability, Jetwing was careful not to attract the youth that was already in the farming and create a vacuum for that industry aligning with the national goals in broader context avoiding any negative impact to culture nor environment (Samuel, 2017).

3.0 Methodology

The methodology used in this study based on qualitative research design, and involved in primary data collection. Thus, the case study method is used for analyzing and understanding the success of the Jetwing Youth Development Project (JYDP). The purpose of the case study is to gather details about the JYDP, through a systematic interview process and to understand the success of JYDP in terms of achieving its objectives. Accordingly, semi – structured interview method was employed, focusing on two contexts of collecting required data. The first part of the interview covers the management perspective of the JYDP and its success by achieving the expected objectives. The second part focused on trainees who have been participated in the project and their feedback about the project in terms of achieving their expected outcomes. The purpose of these two parts was to identify the alignment between project goals with the actual outcomes of the project.

Questions for semi – structured interviews were developed separately for both purposes, and decided to take a sample of 10 participant representing management and trainees of JYDP covering Sigiriya, Passikuda, Negombo, Galle and Tissamaharama. However, with the time constraint and due to environmental restraint, it could only be able to conduct interviews with 4 (1 representing management and 3 – representing trainees).

Before conducting the interviews, the interview scripts were sent to the management of Jetwing group for granting the consent, accordingly the required modifications in to the interview scripts were made with the support of management. Then the interviews were carried out online due to the prevailing travel restrictions in the country. With the consent of the participant interviews were recorded and following the thematic analysis the data collected through interviews was analyzed.

Finally, it is expected to understand the worth of JYDP in terms of achieving project goals as well as its actual contribution on community development.

3.1 Analysis

The flagship project JYDP was initiated to solve a crucial problem in the operations of the Jetwing Hotel chain. “Recruiting skilled and qualified staff from localities was challenging for unknown reasons” (Interviewee 1). Many who were successfully recruited dropped out during their probationary training periods. This posed the threat of not being able to satisfy one of the main and crucial policies of Jetwing; local employment. “The solution was JYDP” (Interviewee 1). “JYDP is designed to empower rural youth who are underprivileged and do not enjoy the opportunities for higher education or meaningful career prospects” (Jetwing Hotels, n.d). JYDP’s main aim is to provide the necessary basic training in the four departments of hospitality; Housekeeping, Food and Beverage, Front Office and Kitchen. Apart from the technical training, a six-month training in English language, soft skills like table etiquette, customer service and being proactive was incorporated. A valid training certificate was to be issued to the candidates who successfully completed the programme and were given jobs aligned to the training hotel. Jetwing canvassed the local schools and communities and soon, the slots were filled up. 600 youth from more than 40 Sri Lankan villages have already passed through the JYDP Programme and entered careers in hospitality at Jetwing and other local and international hotel chains (Jetwing Hotels, n.d).

“Apart from the main JYPD training programme, there are many focused programmes like ‘Lighthouse Community Pool’ and ‘Taxiline through Community’ at Jetwing Lighthouse, Galle” (Interviewee 1). ‘Lighthouse Community Pool’ was built in collaboration with a few other organisations, in the aftermath of the 2004 Tsunami which destroyed communities, homes and basic infrastructure in Galle, Sri Lanka. The pool currently provides swimming lessons for over 26 schools in the community for free. The pool is also open to the public at a nominal fee. “Though there is no direct benefit to the aligned hotel Jetwing Lighthouse, it has built a strong relationship with the community” (Interviewee 1). ‘Taxiline through Community’ connects with taxi drivers who operate in the vicinity of Jetwing Lighthouse, providing them with basic service skills and enabling them to provide the services of a ‘tourist guide’ around the city of Galle which boasts a rich cultural and Dutch influence. “Their services are more than just a taxi driver” (Interviewee 1).

Jetwing Kanduruketha hotel owns and overlooks a paddy field. Farmers borrow paddy acreage and work the fields with the seed capital provided by the hotel at the beginning of the harvest period and an agreement for a 50:50 split of the harvest. The farmers are also given the opportunity to sell their 50% to the hotel at a fixed price higher than the market price. “The visitor satisfaction is very involved in the projects and a first-hand experience of traditional farming in Sri Lanka. This creates an exciting “storytelling” experience” (Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 4 enrolled to JYDP soon after their Ordinary Level examinations. Since joining in 2018, Interviewee 1 has received the full training and been attached to Jetwing Blue, Negombo. “Receiving on-the-job allowance” (Interviewee 2) enabled financial independence early on. On a personal level, Interviewee 1 has become the breadwinner to his parents and three older brother whose livelihood was affected by the pandemic. Confidence from the training and job security has opened financing opportunities from local

financial institutions and encouraged Interviewee 2 to remain and grow with Jetwing and JYDP. Interviewee 2 is the proud owner of a three-wheeler and a plot of land with hopes of building a home. “I have become a strength to my family” (Interviewee 2) resonating the positive, sustainable social impact of community empowerment programmes.

Interviewee 3 joined in 2012 at the JYDP inception and has accumulated 5 years of work experience with Jetwing. After completing the training and brief on-the-job training, Interviewee 3 grabbed international job opportunities in Dubai and Maldives before coming back to Sri Lanka after the pandemic and easily securing a position with Jetwing again. Currently, at a supervisory level in the Kitchen department of Jetwing Blue, Interviewee 3 has the opportunity to move around the Jetwing properties, engaging with other peers and colleagues and specializing in the chosen area. Interviewee 3 is also the main earner in his family. “My accomplishments are vast. I have completed construction of the family home, bought a car and my salary takes care of my parents and unmarried sister’s needs, including her education” (Interviewee 3). Through the programme, Interviewee 3 has acquired a range of skills, good discipline, personal grooming, hygiene and presentation.

Interviewee 1 and 3’s success stories are not shared by many associates who dropped out of JYDP early on. “Many who left are unemployed now” (Interviewee 3). “If only they had continued, they would be enjoying similar benefits as I am” (Interviewee 1).

Interviewee 4 who joined in 2018, manages the family expenses by herself since all members lost their jobs during the pandemic. Being financially independent has enabled the purchase of a scooter and construction of the family home was completed. Interviewee 4, currently a Trainee Assistant Steward in the Food and Beverage department at Jetwing Lagoon, is enjoying a career instilled with vast technical knowledge through JYDP and training on the job. “This programme and others like it are very important to everyone in the community. I believe this was a great opportunity for me and others who join, will fully benefit” (Interviewee 4).

Interviewee 1 and Interviewee 3 who have been in the programme for a few years suggest that prolonged English language training would be beneficial, since English is not the first language of most Sri Lankans. However, Interviewee 2 and Interviewee 4, who have more working years post-JYDP, are confident and it can be assumed that the longer the associates continue their work at Jetwing or the hospitality industry, the literacy in English can achieve satisfactory standards.

JYDP has had an unanticipated positive impact in the community in terms of knowledge about the opportunities in the hospitality industry. “I did not know anything about hotels when I joined the JYDP program, today I know all about customer service and how to work in various departments. Accepting my placement letter from Jetwing was the best decision I ever made” (Interviewee 4, cited in International Finance Corporation, 2020). Interviewee 2’s response echoed, stating “I had never thought about a career in hospitality because I was not informed”. The outreach of JYDP shared information that was an eye-opener to a lucrative industry with massive benefits to all youth”. Interviewee 3 also stated “there was no interest in hospitality because there was no knowledge about the industry before JYDP”.

4.0 Conclusion

The most satisfying simple fact is that through JYDP, lives have been changed – talented and eager youth are given an opportunity to create a new future for themselves (Interviewee 1, Jetwing Hotels n.d). The positive impact of community empowerment has been incentivized by UNWTO and other sustainability-focused organisations. JYDP has proved multiple benefits to the communities they operate in. While achieving the main objective of facilitating local employment as a policy, Jetwing Hotels have successfully created professionals through vocational training and directly contributed to several SDG's outlined by the UNWTO; SDG 1- No Poverty, SDG 2- Zero Hunger, SDG 4- Quality Education, SDG 8- Decent Work And Economic Growth and SDG 11- Sustainable Cities And Communities.

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