

# **TOURISM AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION: UNWTO INNOVATIVE FORMS OF TRANSFERRING KNOWLEDGE TO DEVELOPING COUNTRIES**

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## **RESUMO**

O turismo constitui um forte potencial para redução da pobreza nos países em desenvolvimento, que é o objectivo aglutinador dos oito Objectivos de Desenvolvimento do Milénio (ODM). Assim, nos últimos anos vem-se assistindo a um renovado interesse por parte de governos e agências de desenvolvimento em assumir o turismo como uma estratégia para os países em desenvolvimento no cumprimento de tais objectivos. De facto, a ideia de utilizar o turismo como instrumento para a redução da pobreza tem sido encarada como uma prioridade pelos organismos doadores, governos, ONGs, organizações nacionais e internacionais de turismo, instituições bilaterais e multilaterais, como é o caso da Organização Mundial de Turismo das Nações Unidas, tal como demonstrado pelo lançamento de programas como o *ST-EP* e o *UNWTO.Volunteers*. O presente artigo pretende fornecer contributos para o corpo teórico relativo à área científica do turismo e cooperação internacional para o desenvolvimento, procurando identificar processos inovadores neste domínio de actuação.

## **Palavras-chave:**

cooperação internacional para o desenvolvimento, transferência de conhecimento, redução da pobreza, voluntariado, UNWTO

## **ABSTRACT**

Tourism represents an enormous potential for the reduction of poverty in developing countries, the underpinning objective of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In recent years commitment to tourism as a development strategy for the developing world has gained a renewed interest by governments and development organizations in the fulfilment of MDG. The idea of using tourism as a tool to alleviate poverty has been established as a major priority by donors, governments, NGOs, national and international tourism bodies, bilateral and multilateral institutions, like the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), as is evidenced by the launching of programmes such as the *ST-EP* (Sustainable Tourism for Eliminating Poverty) and the *UNWTO.Volunteers Programme*. This paper intends to make a contribution to the theoretical framework related to the diverse perspectives about development cooperation in tourist destinations in developing countries, and to how can it be done in an innovative way.

## **Keywords:**

international development cooperation, knowledge transfer, poverty alleviation, volunteerism, UNWTO

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Poverty eradication is the first of the United Nations established Millennium Development Goals (MDG), with sustainable tourism being recognized as a major development activity to the attainment of this goal.

Over the last years, commitment to tourism as a development strategy for the developing world has gained a renewed interest within governments and development organizations in the fulfilment of the United Nations MDG. However, the debate about the costs and benefits of tourism to developing countries is not new. Sadler and Archer (1975) and De Kadt (1979) were pioneers in the scientific discourse about this matter. Since then the debate has developed and is still in the centre of the discussion among the tourist scientific academy.

International development assistance plays a major role in the fulfilment of the MDG. Nevertheless, development programmes are often not well succeeded. This happens because most programmes are not interconnected in terms of their final objectives, and fail to contribute to an effective result to combat poverty in the destinations which they are supposed to serve. Therefore, there is a need to bring some innovation in the approach to tourism and development cooperation, namely through the reinforcement of capacity building of the poor, based on knowledge transfer and good governance. As pointed out by Nadkarni (2008: 458), knowledge deficit and poverty go hand in hand.

It is in this context that the present article is set with a twofold purpose: first, to make a contribution to the theoretical framework related to the diverse perspectives about development cooperation in tourist destinations in developing countries; secondly, to discuss the role of UNWTO pro-poor and volunteer programmes as to how it can contribute to fulfil the MDG, supported on a knowledge transfer basis.

## 2 THE ROLE OF TOURISM IN ACHIEVING THE MDG

### 2.1 The MDG and the poverty concept

Throughout the 1990s, a number of global conferences about poverty and development took place before the main objectives of the development agenda were defined

(UN, 2006). In 2000 the United Nations Millennium Declaration was signed and adopted by 189 nations. Eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) were put forward, today almost universally supported:

- 1) eradicate extreme hunger and poverty;
- 2) achieve universal primary education;
- 3) promote gender equality and empower women;
- 4) reduce child mortality;
- 5) improve maternal health;
- 6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases;
- 7) ensure environmental stability;
- 8) Develop a global partnership for development.

Each of the MDG is assigned to a set of targets to be achieved by the year 2015. For the first MDG, the targets till 2015 were to halve the number of people living on less than one dollar a day and suffering from hunger (UN, 2006). However, the assessment of progress to achieve these targets has been difficult due to a lack of adequate data to compile required indicators in several regions of the developing world.

Nevertheless, the United Nations (UN), the multilateral and bilateral development assistance agencies, financial institutions, private corporations, NGOs and other interested parties have been working to achieve the MDG through diverse activities and programmes. It is recognized that the tourism industry can make a substantial contribution to poverty alleviation, sustainable development, inter-cultural understanding and peace among nations.

According to UNDP (1997: iii), “the world has the material and natural resources, the know-how and the people to make a poverty-free world a reality in less than one generation”. Consequently, the eradication of extreme hunger and poverty is not an utopia but a practical and achievable goal. Zhao and Ritchie (2007) believe that tourism, as one of the largest economic drivers in the contemporary world, can play a more active role in achieving such an ambitious goal. In order to accomplish this objective it is crucial to answer the following questions: (1) what is poverty? (2) who are the poor? and (3) how to measure poverty?

Poverty has many dimensions and is a complex concept to be

reduced to a single dimension of human life. It's much more than low income as it also reflects poor health and education, deprivation in knowledge and communication, inability to exercise human and political rights and the absence of dignity, confidence and self-support (UNDP, 1997).

As defined by UNDP (1997), we can have three perspectives on poverty: income, basic needs and capability. The income perspective has been adopted by many countries to monitor progress in reducing poverty through the establishment of an income-based or consumption-based poverty line. The basic needs perspective includes, beyond the low income, the deprivation of basic health, education, employment, participation and other essential services that could otherwise prevent people from falling into poverty. The capability perspective suggests that poverty represents the absence of the basic capabilities to function, from relative deprivation in income and commodities (for example, being well nourished and adequately dressed) to an absolute deficit in the minimum capabilities. Related with this poverty concept it is important to observe that "human poverty includes many aspects that cannot be measured, or are not being measured" (UNDP, 1997:17). In this context, it is possible to define poverty by using both economic and non-economic approaches. The economic approach typically defines poverty in terms of income and consumption. The non-economic approach incorporates concepts such as living standards, basic needs, inequality, subsistence and the human development index. Related with these two approaches, it is possible to use several measures to assess the poverty of a country. Considering the economic approach, the GDP per capita has been widely used although it constitutes, as mentioned above, a limited view of poverty. In order to develop a more complete measure to assess poverty the Human Development Report 1997, published for the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), introduced a Human Poverty Index (HPI). This composite index includes indicators that reflect three essential elements of human life: longevity, knowledge and a decent living standard. The longevity indicator is measured by the percentage of people expected to die before the age of 40. The indicator related to knowledge is measured by the percentage of adults who are illiterate.

The third indicator, a decent living standard, is composed by three variables - the percentage of people with access to health services, with access to safe water and malnourished children under five.

Considering the economic approach to measure poverty, the World Bank categorized the countries into three groups – low income, middle-income and high income countries. The term developed countries is generally referred to the high income OECD member states, while developing countries include all the remaining nations in the world (Liu, 1998). Today more than 125 nations can be considered developing nations, as measured by low per capita income and modest or low ranking on such human development criteria as literacy, life expectancy and education. The poorest countries (low-income countries) represent 37% of the total population, being responsible by only 3% of all income.

## 2.2 POVERTY AND TOURISM

The tourism industry makes a significant contribution to the world economy. The latest figures of the WTTC (2009) show that the tourism industry is expected to contribute to 7.6% of total employment, 9.4% of total Gross Domestic Product, 9.4% of total investment and 10.9% of total exports in 2009.

According to the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2008b), the international tourism receipts represented in 2007 approximately 6% of global exports of goods and services and 30% of worldwide exports of services. It is clear that tourism is certainly the largest global service industry. In addition, the growth rates of international tourism in the last years were considerable. International tourism receipts grew to US\$ 856 billion in 2007, while in 1950 this value was only US\$ 2 billion, corresponding to an annual average increase rate of about 14% (UNWTO, 2008b). International tourist arrivals also grew from 25 million to 903 million from 1950 to 2007. The *UNWTO Tourism 2020 Vision Study Forecasts* indicates that the number of international arrivals worldwide will increase to 1.6 billion by 2020 (UNWTO, 2001; UNWTO, 2008b). These figures demonstrate that tourism plays an important role in world development through the economic benefits that it generates to countries, mainly in

the developing world. This is reflected in the increase of income, generating foreign exchange earnings, attracting international investment, increasing tax revenues and creating new jobs. Although the economic significance of tourism for developing countries is being largely recognized, only recently tourism has been exalted as a powerful tool to face poverty (Blake, 2008; Scheyvens, 2007; Zhao and Ritchie, 2007).

Why can we expect tourism to play such an important role for poverty alleviation? A cross analysis between the location of poverty worldwide and the tourism flows suggests that tourism has grown much faster in developing countries than in developed countries. While in 1950 the top 15 destinations absorbed 88 percent of international arrivals, this figure progressively decreased to 57 percent in 2007, reflecting the emergence of new developing country destinations (UNWTO, 2008b). According to recent data of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and UNWTO, today tourism is the main source of foreign exchange for one-third of developing countries and one-half of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs). Developing countries account for 40 percent of world tourism arrivals and 30 percent of the world tourism receipts. Furthermore, tourism exports exhibit high export growth rates, which between 2003 and 2008 were 15 percent for developing countries and 21 percent for the LDCs (Mashayekhi, 2010).

Tourism is therefore widely regarded as a means of achieving development in many developing countries. However, when the objective is to analyse how tourism can contribute to worldwide poverty alleviation, we should address the following question: How can tourism benefit the poor?

It is not enough to assume that tourism economic benefits will drip down automatically to the poor. According to UNWTO (2004), it is widely recognised that the reduction in poverty worldwide can only be achieved if the benefits of economic growth are equitably redistributed, or if the poor themselves participate in the economic activities, as employees or managers. Tourism is an industry that uses the local resources as attractions. Thus, the participation of local community in the products supply chain is crucial. On the other hand, tourism not only provides material benefits for

the poor, but can also contribute to “cultural pride, a sense of ownership and control and, through diversification, reduced vulnerability” (UNWTO, 2004:65).

It is not always easy to differentiate the impacts of tourism from those of other development activities. Although Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) provides a promising solution, it only measures the contribution of tourism to the macro economy rather than specifically to a certain social group, like the poor.

Tourism affects the livelihoods of the poor in many ways. Despite the fact that the impacts of tourism may differ between poor groups, destinations and types of tourism, making it difficult to generalise, we observe that its main positive impacts are often the creation of economic opportunities, skills development, incentives for natural resource conservation, enhancement of infrastructure and public health, the increase in self-esteem because of enhanced capacities. However, there are also many negative impacts often associated with the loss of access to natural resources, conflicts with other livelihood activities, exclusion from tourism planning and the lack of self-determination, cultural intrusion and social disruption, such as sex abuse with children and youngsters. The poorest have less capital and skills to exploit the economic opportunities, are more fragile and vulnerable, and are more likely to suffer the negative impacts on local resources (DFID, 1999).

According to UNWTO (2008b), a tourism development plan is a fundamental instrument to address poverty alleviation, and it should adopt the following principles: to ensure that sustainable tourism development is included in general poverty alleviation programmes; to develop partnerships between public and private sector; to adopt an integrated approach with other sectors; to ensure that tourism development strategies focus on achieving a more equitable distribution of wealth and services; to focus action at a local destination level; to reduce leakages from the local economy and increase linkages within it; to maintain sound financial discipline and assess the viability of all actions taken; to create conditions to empower women; to remove all forms of discrimination against people working; to develop measures to assess the impact of tourism on poverty.

The UNWTO (2004) has identified seven different ways for poverty reduction through tourism:

- 1) employment of the poor in tourism enterprises;
- 2) supply of goods and services to tourism enterprises by the poor or by enterprises employing the poor;
- 3) direct sales of goods and services to visitors by the poor;
- 4) establishment of tourism enterprises by the poor;
- 5) tax or levy on tourism income or profits with proceeds benefiting the poor;
- 6) voluntary giving by tourism enterprises and tourists;
- 7) investment in infrastructure stimulated by tourism also benefiting the poor.

For many less developed countries the significance of tourism revenues has increased its importance due to decline in other parts of their economies (Scheyvens and Momsen, 2008). Tourism holds out the promise of becoming a substantial new growth sector for many “Third World Economies” (Brohman, 1996). Although tourism may generate a significant growth in the developing countries, there are some potential contradictions, such as: high rates of foreign ownerships contributing to a loss of control over local resources; substantial overseas leakage of tourism earnings; lack of articulation with other domestic economic sectors; low multiplier and spread effects outside of tourism enclaves; reinforcement of patterns of socioeconomic inequality and spatial unevenness. This opinion is corroborated by Carbone (2007) who states that although the tourism industry has constantly grown, developing countries have benefited less than expected because of the “leakage” problem. Developed countries take advantage of developing countries landscape, but the portion of money spent in developing countries for tourism is very small in comparison: hotels, tour operators, airlines are frequently owned or controlled by multinational corporations (Carbone, 2007). Additionally, the main constraint to tourism development in poor countries is the lack of trained people to work in the industry. Human resources are thus an important source of sustained competitive advantage in the international tourism industry.

According to Zhao and Ritchie (2007), in the last decades there has been increasing interest from governments and development organizations in tourism-based approaches to poverty alleviation. In this context, poverty alleviation has been established as a major priority within the UNWTO, but in the tourism academic community this subject has been largely neglected. Therefore, the analysis of the tourism impact in poverty alleviation reflects an essential change in the philosophy of tourism development. Traditionally, the most common belief is that the regional economic growth is the most important goal of regional tourism development, with the poverty alleviation being considered a sub-goal or a natural outcome of regional economic growth (Zhao and Ritchie, 2007). Consequently, according to Christie (2002), policymakers have paid more attention to the development of tourism industry and little attention to its contribution to poverty alleviation. This situation clearly needs to be reversed.

### 3 TOURISM AND INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE

There are several approaches to international development assistance in which tourism is considered the main tool for poverty alleviation. The scope of initiatives that can be considered is quite diversified. Some include projects focused, on one hand, on the pro-poor strategies, solidarity or fair tourism, community-based-tourism, volunteer tourism, among others; and, on the other hand, there are a range of programmes implemented by NGOs, international aid agencies, the World Bank, the World Tourism Organization to name a few, that work all for the same objective: the poverty alleviation, yet with different approaches. Considering the vast range of the existing initiatives and programmes, there is a need to understand their different nature, types of interventions and results. These should generally be focused mainly on the principle of knowledge and expertise transfer, as supported by UNWTO, instead of punctual interventions in many different projects with disarticulated aims. This is however what often occurs, with no to limited contribution to an effective capacity building, in the long term, at the developing countries destinations.

New shapes of alternative tourism are becoming part

of projects that involve cooperation for development such as: volunteer tourism, community-based-tourism, solidarity tourism, fair tourism, among others. Also the strategies inherent to Pro-Poor Tourism programmes can be considered in this frame of initiatives although, as it will be explained below, its scope embraces more than local projects aims.

Thus, there is a semantic difference between all these terms but in fact they reflect only different tangible nuances in points of view and activities. Due to its growing importance in recent years and the relation that they may have with international development assistance, volunteer tourism and pro-poor tourism will be analysed in more detail below.

### 3.1 VOLUNTEER TOURISM

Volunteer tourism is one of the major growth areas in contemporary tourism as referenced in the scientific literature that is following up this trend in the last years (Wearing, 2001; Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Mustonen, 2005; others).

According to Wearing (2001: 1), volunteer tourists are:

Those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organised way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments or research into aspects of society or environment.

Volunteer tourism may be seen under two dimensions: the first is on the time tourists dedicate to work on projects that are established to enhance the environment of a less developed region or a local community; and the second dimension is related to the development of oneself through the intrinsic rewards of contributing to those projects (Callanan & Thomas, 2005).

Nevertheless, we could say that volunteer tourism has become a “mass niche” market in the last few years, as a result of increased recognition of the negative impacts of mass tourism, which was facilitated by a number of factors: the growth in volunteer projects, the variety of destinations promoted, the range of target markets and the type of players involved, like charities, tour operators, private agencies (Callanan & Thomas, 2005), as well as international development agencies.

Furthermore, Wearing (2001) argues that there may be a conflict of interests between the free market economy of the tourism industry and the volunteer tourism in some developing countries. Indeed, profit is the focus of the former and the communities and the environment are generally the priority of the latter. The fact is that volunteer tourism may contribute to create capacities regarding human resources that are then needed for the implementation of some of the international development assistance projects. In the majority of times volunteer tourism means a cooperation between the tourists and the local communities, with local population taking an active part in projects that can definitely contribute to the improvement of their quality of life (Wearing, 2001).

### 3.2 PRO-POOR TOURISM (PPT)

Pro-poor tourism is defined by Ashley *et al.* (2001: 2) in the following terms:

Tourism that generates net benefits for the poor. Benefits may be economic, but they may also be social, environmental or cultural. The definition says nothing about relative distribution of the benefits of the tourism. Therefore, as long as poor people reap net benefits, tourism can be classified as “pro-poor” (even if rich people benefit more than poor people). [...] we focus on strategies that enhance benefits to the poor [...] however pro-poor tourism cannot succeed without the successful development of the entire tourism destination in question.

The same authors state that PPT is not a specific product or sector of tourism, but rather an approach to the industry, involving a range of stakeholders (the government, the private sector and civil society, as well as the poor themselves who act as both producers and decision-makers) that operate at different levels, from micro to macro.

PPT is a recent concept. The first paper written about it was in 1998 for the *Department of International Development* (DFID) in the UK. Subsequently, in 1999, the *Commission on Sustainable Development* adopted a commitment to utilise tourism’s pro-poor potential. There was an increased emphasis on pro-poor tourism following

the United Nations' Millennium Declaration. According to DFID (1999), development agencies have been since then developing sustainable livelihoods approaches in response to the UN MDG, and tourism has been adopted by a number of governmental and non-governmental bodies as part of this process. As an example, in 2002, the UNWTO adopted a Tourism and Poverty Alleviation approach and launched the ST-EP Programme.

PPT interventions may vary enormously in terms of focus and scale as it can include either a private enterprise seeking to expand economic opportunities for the poor or a national programme enhancing participation by the poor at all levels (Ashley *et al.*, 2001). The impacts of the PPT initiatives may affect a few hundreds directly and thousands indirectly. These may be reflected on benefits not only on incomes but on livelihood or on improved access to information and infrastructure, pride and cultural reinforcement. However this is very difficult to measure, even though there are already several case studies that reveal some progress and lessons on good practice. PPT approaches and related case studies are very well documented and have been discussed in many *fora* partly on behalf of the *Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership*, with many efforts done on searching progress.

According to PPT-P (2007), five years following the launching of the initiative there were still only a few cases with demonstrable impacts. Therefore there is a kind of a disappointment as the authors consider that most impacts that are evident are still at the very micro local level, based on a single product or locality. These auto-criticisms of the founder members of the Pro-Poor Tourism Partnership are reinforced by several authors (Chok *et al.*, 2007; Gascón, 2009; Hall & Brown, 2006; Harrison, 2008; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007).

Hall & Brown (2006) state that, because initiatives are small-scale, site-specific or at early stages of implementation, they didn't make a visible impact at the national level of the poorest countries. This would require a shift across the sector. Furthermore, being promoted by Western development NGOs and government departments Hall & Brown question at what extent PPT doesn't simply provide another route for the perpetuation

of long-standing economic imperialism and dependency through tourism. Thus they argue that if tourism is to be a part of the "Third World" development processes, it should be in the first place preceded by good quality health and welfare provision for those countries' citizens. PPT may legitimize corporative politics and interests, a kind of neoliberalism with negative consequences in the local societies, economies and ecosystems (Chok *et al.*, 2007; Gascón, 2009; Hall & Brown, 2006; Harrison, 2008; Schilcher, 2007; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). According to Schilcher (2007), it is necessary to shift policy focus from growth to equity, which calls for strong institutions capable of regulating the tourism industry and distributing assets (empowerment of the poor). Nevertheless, this is unlikely to be pursued in practice given policy-makers' neoliberal bias and systemic constraints, as well as due to the fact that the values of powerful stakeholders greatly shape outcomes in developing countries (Chok *et al.*, 2007; Schilcher, 2007). Hence, Schilcher (2007: 178) argues that PPT should only be promoted if:

- (1) it does not replace distributive policies that have as their main focus reducing inequalities and benefiting the 'poorest', such as wide-ranging social protection, labour standards, equitable taxation and redistribution of assets, investment in education and health, and facilitation of local ownership and control over 'development';
- (2) it's 'moulded' so that 'the poor' and 'poorest' receive a proportionately higher share of tourism's benefits than people above the poverty line in order to reduce poverty-enhancing inequalities.

For PPT to focus on redistribution, closer attention would have to be paid to governance issues, including the role of the State (Clancy, 1999; Harrison, 2008) as well as of the wider world system "so that developing countries are granted greater decision-making power in institutions such as the World Trade Organization" (Schilcher, 2007: 182). Nadkarni (2008) adds that a dedicated mechanism to knowledge creation, retention, exchange, devolution, interpretation and treatment (termed as K-CREDIT) in

tourism should be implemented at the grassroots level. Such mechanism would span economically disadvantaged destinations, on the premises that knowledge deficit perpetuates a vicious cycle of economic deprivation and poverty. This process would be a potent instrument in achieving the MDG. The concept of knowledge brokerage has been also developing in this context contemplating issues of communication, interaction, sharing of knowledge, contribution to common understandings, as well as to effective and efficient action (Sheate and Partidário, 2010). Knowledge brokerage has become a strong driver in recent sustainability discourses, with a body of literature in several scientific areas, including tourism, that is encouraging the importance of knowledge sharing and transfer as a way of breaking down barriers that impede interaction, healthy communication and collaboration. According to Sheate and Partidário (2010), often knowledge brokerage is linked to how different social network structures influence the ability of organizations to determine access to and transfer of knowledge and enhance innovation.

### 3.3 THE UNWTO PRO-POOR TOURISM AND VOLUNTEERISM APPROACH

As a development strategy, tourism is increasingly being supported by multilateral development agencies and financial institutions, as well as by bilateral institutions and NGOs, as a tool to poverty reduction and to achieving the MDGs. In 2004, the UNWTO organised a *Tourism Policy Forum* that impelled new commitments from multilateral donor agencies such as the World Bank (Hawkins & Mann, 2007), leading to a new approach in which tourism would be considered as the “entry point to development in areas like infrastructure and rural renewal” (Ferguson, 2007:5).

The UNWTO is the leading international organization with a decisive and central role in world tourism. It serves as a global forum for tourism policy issues and a practical source of tourism know-how. As a result it has the ability to influence national and international development policies. Its membership includes 154 countries, seven territories and more than 300 affiliate members representing local government, tourism associations and private enterprises. In 2003, it has achieved UN specialised agency status and

tourism gained official acknowledgement from the World Bank on its importance for poverty reduction. With this mandate UNWTO is even more required to promote tourism as a potential tool for development, according to the MDGs.

UNWTO works with a broad range of institutions, from national governments to private tourism industry actors (Ferguson, 2007). Its role can be understood in a number of ways: as a campaigning organisation for the tourism industry; as a donor for tourism development projects; and as the primary source of research and statistics on global tourism. Two key aims guide the organization: on one hand tourism as a tool for poverty reduction and development and, on the other hand, the further liberalisation of the tourism services sector. These two aims, establishing the UNWTO concept of “tourism development”, may potentially be hard to conciliate (Ferguson, 2007; Schilcher, 2007).

In 2002, UNWTO launched the ST-EP Programme (Sustainable Tourism – Eliminating Poverty) at the *World Summit for Sustainable Development*, in Johannesburg, to develop sustainable tourism as an engine for poverty alleviation, with the same principles of the PPT approach. This initiative focuses on longstanding work to encourage sustainable tourism “which specifically alleviates poverty, bringing development and jobs to people living on less than a dollar a day” linking it to the MDGs (UNWTO, 2008a).

Nevertheless, the same criticisms pointed out above to pro-poor tourism strategies are being applied to UNWTO by several authors (Chok *et al.*, 2007; Gascón, 2009; Hall & Brown, 2006; Harrison, 2008; Scheyvens, 2007; Schilcher, 2007; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007), almost all focussed on the contradictory perspectives of poverty alleviation and neoliberalism. For instance, Scheyvens (2007) reinforce this idea stating that the UNCTAD, an organization focused on international trade promotion, is a major partner of the ST-EP Programme and that the UNWTO green and pro-poor agendas led to new initiatives in the last years, but that their main motivation is still to promote economic growth through tourism. Besides, the ways that are suggested by UNWTO to



address poverty through tourism “focus mainly on the local level, without addressing changes at national and global levels which could be of far greater significance” (Scheyvens, 2007: 245).

#### *THE UNWTO.VOLUNTEERS PROGRAMME*

In 2005, the UNWTO, through its Themis Foundation, put into practice the UNWTO.TedQual Volunteers Programme – which was recently renamed as UNWTO. Volunteers Programme. This programme was designed to support developing countries to accomplish a sustainable and more competitive tourism sector based on the knowledge management framework through education, training and research.

The knowledge transfer intended by the UNWTO. Volunteers Programme is supported by volunteer participants from universities and other education institutions in the developed and developing worlds, governments and civil society in the country which hosts the programme. This knowledge management approach to volunteering implies the cumulative knowledge and expertise of the UNWTO and tourism education institutions being transferred to governments, education institutions, tourism organizations, and civil society in the developing countries as to increase the country’s knowledge capacity and thus assisting their sustainable development efforts (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2008).

The main aims of the UNWTO.Volunteers Programme are the following (UNWTO, 2009):

- To support the UNWTO Member States and international cooperation agencies in the formulation and implementation of plans, programmes and projects through the technical contribution of UNWTO experts and volunteers.
- To train, in both theory and practice, professionals with the suitable vocation and aptitudes in the field of tourism as an instrument for development: Volunteers.
- To disseminate, through education and training, the policies of the UNWTO in the field of tourism, especially, tourism’s role as an instrument of development and its potential to contribute to poverty reduction.

To achieve these purposes UNWTO.Volunteers Programme undertakes a tourism development project in a region or destination in a developing country that asks for support to UNWTO to develop a project considered important for its sustainable tourism development efforts. The chosen project should be focused on assigned areas such as: marketing strategies; product assessment and identification of product gaps and product development; business plan creation; international development; development of community-based tourism plans and of pro-poor tourism strategies (UNWTO, 2009).

Once the UNWTO and the host country government agree on the scope, nature and deliverables of the project, the programme will be undertaken then in collaboration with local stakeholders and the volunteer group, through the following phases: (1) preparatory coursework; (2) selection of the volunteers for the specific destination; (3) planning and research of secondary data previous to the fieldwork (2 months); (4) fieldwork (2-3 weeks); (5) submission of final report with conclusions and recommendations for future action (2-3 months); (6) additional projects and research at the request of the host government and other stakeholders.

The volunteers will be involved for about six months in the project. During this period they will work on extensive research on tourism in the selected country including an analysis of general tourism trends for both the destination and the broader region, “including visitor arrivals data and traveller profiles, competitive benchmark analysis and assessments of current branding, image and marketing strategies” (Ruhanen *et al.*, 2008: 29).

Ruhanen *et al.* (2008: 30) emphasise its benefits for all stakeholder groups as follows:

The host country receives high-level consulting at little or no cost; the only expense, which may be assumed by a partnering development agency, will be in-country transport and accommodation for the volunteers. The UNWTO TedQual student volunteers gain important tourism development field experience, with their only expenses being airfares and in-country sundries. Further

benefits accrue for the UNWTO member tourism education institution and their in-country institutional partner who have the opportunity to learn through collaboration with one another. From the UNWTO perspective, the programme provides the opportunity to disseminate knowledge to developing countries through education, training and research, with the aim of producing directions and strategies for sustainable tourism development.

Since its 2005 edition and until 2009 (with some major changes from 2007 on), the projects took place in the following destinations: Mexico (Tabasco, 2005), Ecuador (2005), Argentina (2005), Mexico (Chiapas, 2008), Uruguay (2008) and Colombia (2009). In Box 1 a synthesis of Mexico 2008 edition is presented based on the participant observation of the first author.

In September 2008, the UNWTO.Volunteers Programme undertook a project in Chiapas, Mexico, to develop a competitiveness plan for five municipalities of the state of Chiapas, and a tourism vision for the year 2015. The project was organized by the Government of Mexico, the Government of the State of Chiapas and the UNWTO. It comprised an interdisciplinary team of ten volunteers from Spain, Portugal, Brazil, Guatemala and Mexico plus three local volunteers, as well as three UNWTO experts and officials. Following the previous coursework programme and the planning and research of secondary data, the volunteer team undertook a 3-week fieldwork trip and was accompanied by the officials from the tourism administration of Chiapas. The volunteers undertook interviews, workshops, surveys and an inventory and analysis of tourism resources. Consultation and engagement of the local community in the project was a primary consideration and during the field work hundreds of people were consulted in interviews and workshops with representatives from municipal and state governments, the private sector and civil society. In April 2009, UNWTO delivered to the authorities of Chiapas the report "Chiapas 2015: Strategic Planning and Tourism Competitiveness", consisting of a developing plan for tourism competitiveness, including strategic proposals for the 5 municipalities involved.

Box 1. The example of UNWTO.Volunteers Programme in Mexico, 2008 (Chiapas)

Considering that the main aim of the UNWTO.Volunteers Programme is knowledge transfer and deliver of benefits to all stakeholders, this may be considered a good example of international development assistance, yet still with no evidences on the effective impacts on poverty.

#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

Tourism offers a great potential to poverty alleviation in developing countries and can thus have a great contribution to the fulfilment of the commitments assumed by the *Millennium Declaration*. However, poverty, as we attempted to demonstrate in this paper, must be targeted as equity and not as growth, which calls for ideological and systematic changes, including a change in the international governance concerning the tourism system. As noted by several authors, the promotion of tourism *per se* will at best only reduce poverty headcount, while it is likely to further exacerbate the severity and depth of poverty.

There is a great variety of institutions that are dedicated to tourism development that support projects and programmes in their respective domain areas, providing technical assistance in developing countries. Yet, there is a lack of more systematic and global approaches to assess the outcomes of the interventions of the mentioned organizations in terms of the economic, social and environmental impacts in developing tourism projects. Some initiatives and programmes have developed different and better approaches in order to achieve better results. This is specially the case of the Pro-poor Tourism Partnership that looks for a more global approach and which, in the last few years, has been developing great efforts to implement new evaluation methodologies, such as the recent tourism value chain approach in some of their projects (Ashley & Mitchell, 2008). UNWTO has been launching in recent years some programmes with the major aim of alleviating poverty, like the ST-EP. Nevertheless this programme, being deeply connected with pro-poor tourism strategies, with a neoliberal connotation, is subject to severe criticisms by the scientific literature in this domain for likely conflicting aims.

On the other hand, volunteer tourism could have a positive impact in some developing destinations as it may represent an important human resource base for the successful implementation of some of the developing initiatives. Assuming knowledge deficit as a key driver of poverty, considering that the main aim of the UNWTO. Volunteers Programme is knowledge transfer and deliver of benefits to all stakeholders, this may be considered a good example of international development assistance as well as representing a contemporary and innovative approach to volunteering. In any case, there needs to be more debate about the outputs of the international cooperation based on the initiatives and programmes that take tourism as a tool for development. Yet, considering that poverty is a multi-dimensional phenomenon, it will be difficult to assess the impact of tourism development initiatives in all dimensions, which demands further research.

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