

a cura di  
Gabriele Manella

# Oltre il turismo?

Viaggi e viaggiatori  
nella società del (post)Covid

SOCIOLOGIA DEL TERRITORIO



TURISMO E LOISIR

# Sociologia del territorio

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SOCIOLOGIA DEL TERRITORIO





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TURISMO E LOISIR

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## *16. Social Innovation in Tourism for the Inner Areas: Desire, Mirage or Nightmare?*

by *Olga Tzatzadaki, Maurizio Busacca*

### **Introduction**

Social Innovation in Tourism (SIT) has garnered increasing attention in recent years as a way to address the pressing socio-economic challenges faced by rural and inner areas, particularly in Mediterranean regions. As traditional tourism models often fail to adequately address the needs of these areas, Sit offers a promising framework for fostering sustainable development and enhancing local resilience. Through innovative practices, it encourages community-driven initiatives that can tackle issues as depopulation and economic decline, while also promoting cultural preservation and environmental stewardship.

This paper presents a systematic literature review on SIT, with a specific focus on ten studies related to Mediterranean inner areas. These regions, often marginalized and facing rural gentrification, risk becoming overly reliant on tourism as a development strategy, leading to phenomena such as “touristification”. While this sector can bring much-needed economic benefits, it also presents risks, such as displacing local populations, altering traditional livelihoods, and undermining local culture. Our review critically examines these dynamics, exploring how SIT can mitigate these risks and offer sustainable alternatives to rural gentrification.

Furthermore, the paper highlights the importance of using vitality as an indicator to assess the success and sustainability of tourism initiatives. Vitality refers to the capacity of a region to maintain its population, cultural identity, and economic viability in the face of external pressures. This indicator is particularly relevant in the context of depopulation, a significant challenge for Mediterranean inner areas. By leveraging SIT, these regions can potentially reverse depopulation trends and foster long-term resilience.

The review concludes by exploring the interplay between SIT, rural gentrification, and the risks of touristification, emphasizing the need for balanced, community-centric approaches to tourism development in these vulnerable areas.

## **1. Unpacking Social Innovation in Tourism: Insights from a Systematic Literature Review**

### *1.1. Exploring SIT: Initiatives Discussed in Literature*

Social Innovation in Tourism (SIT) has gained prominence in recent years, although its full systematisation remains incomplete (Sorensen, 2007; Hjalager, 2010, 2012; Işık *et al.*, 2019). Historically, tourism innovation research has been largely focused on technology (Wirth *et al.*, 2002; Gomezelj, 2016), overlooking the complexity of actors and networks involved in the innovation process (Trunfio & Campana, 2019; Kofler *et al.*, 2018). Additionally, the study of tourism innovation policies is underdeveloped (Hall, 2009; Hall, Williams, 2008; Hjalager, 2010, 2012), leaving key questions about emerging trends and research gaps unanswered (Işık *et al.*, 2019).

SIT reflects a broader shift in innovation models from closed, internal processes to open, community-driven approaches (Autio, Thomas, 2014; Etzkowitz, Leydesdorff, 2000). This transition moves away from siloed knowledge to open exchanges that prioritise collaboration with local communities (Chesbrough, 2003; Borghys *et al.*, 2020). Innovation has become territorially and socially embedded, relying on local knowledge and community engagement (Carayannis, Campbell, 2009; Sassen, 2000; Ramella, 2015). With this shift, SIT aligns with social innovation (SI), which focuses on addressing social challenges in novel ways (Murray *et al.*, 2010). SIT aims to create equitable systems and include marginalised communities in the innovation process (Chiodo *et al.*, 2019), with local participation playing a crucial role in ensuring fair distribution of benefits (Lopez, Ramos, 2015).

SI, though rooted in historical concepts (Borelli, Busacca 2020; Godin 2015), gained prominence in the 2010s as a strategy aligned with social investment approaches (Hemerijck, 2017; Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2019). While social investment promotes labour market participation, SI initiatives focus on entrepreneurial, collective, or grassroots activation. Both strategies, however, share a trust in the market as a means of integrating economy and society (Busacca, 2022). SI lacks a specific field of application (Mou-

laert *et al.*, 2013), instead proposing a new way of producing welfare by achieving solutions with fewer public resources (Busacca, 2019).

In the past decade, SI has also appeared in tourism innovation studies (Trunfio, Campana, 2019; Wirth *et al.*, 2022). Social Innovation in Tourism (SIT) seeks to address local challenges such as unemployment and community abandonment through new cooperation models and problem-solving strategies (Moulaert *et al.*, 2013; Neumeier, 2012). SIT initiatives provide region-specific solutions (Edwards-Schachter, Wallace, 2017), engaging society in collective action (Bock, 2016).

The aim of SIT is to redesign the relation between tourism and local communities to combat poverty and inequality by offering improved access to social, cultural, and economic resources for targeted groups (Oosterlynck *et al.*, 2019; Moulaert, McCallum, 2019). This is investigated across three levels: the needs being addressed and the beneficiaries (micro-level), the participants in the innovation process (meso-level), and governance processes that foster SI (macro-level) (Trunfio, Campana, 2019). At the micro-level, SI addresses individual and group needs through social change, influencing social capital and local development (Neumeier, 2017; Choi, Majumdar, 2015; Gallouj *et al.*, 2018). At the meso-level, SI emphasizes the involvement of diverse actors, including local communities, NGOs, and non-profits (Trunfio, Campana, 2019). At the macro-level, SI involves institutional change through new value propositions and governance models (Alegre, Berbegal-Mirabet, 2016; Polese *et al.*, 2018).

Despite increasing interest, studies on how SIT emerges and which actors are involved remain limited (Wirth *et al.*, 2022). To understand this better, a systematic literature review of 65 articles and conference proceedings was conducted, considering case studies and theoretical discussions to examine SI initiatives, actors, and processes within SIT.

The authors conducted their review sourced from Scopus and Web of Science. They employed a two-tier analysis. In the first tier (a-level), the papers were considered on their temporal, geographical, and thematic distribution. In the second tier (b-level), the focus shifted to identifying the social needs and target groups addressed by SI initiatives (micro-level), the networks of actors involved and their interactions (meso-level), and the role of local governance and institutions in supporting these initiatives (macro-level).

### *1.2. A and B Level Analysis: Clusters, Actors, Networks, Governance*

The first paper appeared in 2007, with production increasing significantly from 2016 onwards, peaking in 2021 (12 papers). This growth

coincides with global tourism trends, particularly the rise in tourist flows starting in 2014 and the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on tourism, with many studies focusing on domestic and proximity tourism and SI initiatives to address these challenges. Most authors were from Europe, especially Italy, and studies focused on addressing local challenges through domestic and proximity tourism. Regarding case studies, 31 were from within the EU, with a strong focus on addressing issues such as over-tourism, under-tourism, and social inequalities. Regarding Southern Europe, the majority of the papers deal with ways of triggering sustainable tourism for inner areas, which we will better discuss in the following paragraphs. Other case studies were from Asia, Latin America, and regions like South Africa and North America, where tourism is often seen as a means to combat poverty and unemployment in local communities.

The literature review identified six clusters of SI initiatives in tourism: a) ICT and technology-oriented; b) Rural tourism and ecotourism; c) Environmentally sustainable development; d) Local participation and community-based tourism (CBT); e) Cultural heritage and creative industries; f) Social entrepreneurship (Tab. 1).

*Tab. 1 - Clusters of social innovations in tourism*

<i>Cluster</i>	<i>N. of papers</i>
ICT and technology-oriented	10
Rural tourism and ecotourism	6
Environmentally sustainable development	14
Local participation and community-based tourism	15
Cultural heritage and creative industries	11
Social entrepreneurship	9

The findings from the b level analysis of SI initiatives in tourism reveal insights across micro, meso, and macro levels.

At the micro-level, SI initiatives align with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, primarily addressing safety needs through employment and financial security. Community-Based Tourism initiatives enhance opportunities for co-design and decision-making, promoting both economic and social inclusion through responsible tourism (Elias, Barbero, 2021; Malek, Costa, 2015; Martini *et al.*, 2017; Nurhasanah, Van den Broeck, 2022). These initiatives further impact individuals' needs by protecting natural resources, generating income, fostering community connections, and enhancing self-

esteem (Alegre, Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016; Batista *et al.*, 2021; Chiodo *et al.*, 2019; Corbisiero, 2021; Lopez, Ramos, 2015; Moleiro, 2021; Partanen, 2021; Trombadore, 2020; Wirth *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, rural and eco-tourism initiatives are associated with improved lifestyle and quality of life (Arboleda *et al.*, 2020; Belliggiano, 2021; Chiodo *et al.*, 2019).

The meso-level analysis examined local networks of actors, focusing on their typologies as “industrial districts” or “strategic alliances” (Inkpen, Tsang, 2005) and orientations as “bonding” or “bridging” networks (Putnam, 2001). All papers highlight the importance of local (micro) and global (macro) networks (Amore, Hall, 2016; Sørensen, 2007). While the ICT cluster emphasizes international connections, other clusters focus on local interactions (Batle *et al.*, 2018; Lopez, Ramos, 2015; Mahato, 2021; Partanen, 2022). Involved actors include public entities (administrations, universities) (Elias, Barbero, 2021; Trombadore, 2020) and private stakeholders (entrepreneurs, artists) (Milwood, 2020; Nurhasanah, Van den Broeck, 2022; Partanen, 2023), representing the “quintuple helix” model (Iaione, 2017). However, there is a knowledge gap regarding brokerage and network management processes, highlighting the need for further research on actor interactions and network dynamics (Aquino *et al.*, 2018; Wirth, 2022).

The macro-level analysis focuses on governance within tourism contexts, examining the orientation toward innovation or conservation (Della Lucia, Trunfio, 2012) and the typology of governance, whether top-down or collaborative (Sabatier, 1986). A key finding is that most papers lack detailed information on governance profiles, though this has started to change recently (Gustafsson, Amer, 2023; Horgan, Baum, 2023; Sarkki *et al.*, 2022; Tresiana, Duadji, 2022). The term “community” is often used rhetorically in relation to decision-making rights, yet it encompasses diverse social groups with varying needs, complicating genuine participation. Additionally, there is insufficient attention to conflicts arising from differing interests among actors in participative governance, indicating a knowledge gap in this area (Elias, Barbero, 2021; Wirth *et al.*, 2022; Partanen *et al.*, 2023).

## **2. Navigating the Complexities of Social Innovation in Tourism: Insights from Southern Europe**

### *2.1. Social Innovation in Tourism Amidst the Challenges of Rural Gentrification*

As mentioned above, 10 out of 65 papers focus on social innovation in tourism within Southern Europe. This subset highlights the unique chal-

allenges and opportunities faced by this region, where tourism plays a crucial role in economic development and community resilience.

The papers examine various aspects of social innovation, including community-based tourism, sustainable practices, and the integration of local cultural heritage into tourism initiatives. These studies underscore how social innovation can address pressing issues such as depopulation and economic disparity in inner areas. By fostering collaboration among local stakeholders and promoting inclusive decision-making, these initiatives aim to enhance both social cohesion and economic vitality. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how social innovation can be leveraged in Southern Europe to create more sustainable and equitable tourism models, benefiting local communities and preserving cultural identity.

In particular, case studies of inner areas in Southern Europe, particularly in Italy, France, Portugal, and Spain, illustrate the significant role of rural tourism and eco-tourism in revitalizing these regions (Chiodo *et al.*, 2019; Belliggiano *et al.*, 2021). These initiatives not only promote sustainable economic growth but also enhance local quality of life by leveraging natural resources and fostering environmental stewardship. Community-based tourism has emerged as a crucial strategy, emphasizing local engagement and empowerment, as evidenced by research from Malek and Costa (2015), Martini *et al.* (2017), Borgnet (2019), and Borgnet and Le Touzè (2021). This approach encourages residents to participate actively in the tourism process, allowing them to share their cultural heritage, traditions, and unique experiences with visitors.

Cultural heritage, in particular, serves as a powerful tool for attracting tourists and enriching the visitor experience. Several studies (Morales Yago *et al.*, 2018; Moleiro, 2021; Splendiani *et al.*, 2022) highlight how the preservation and promotion of local history, architecture, and traditions not only draw attention to these inner areas but also foster a sense of pride among local communities. This cultural engagement is essential for sustainable tourism development, as it helps create a distinctive identity for these regions.

In these countries, where tourism constitutes a key component of national GDP, integrating rural tourism, community-based initiatives, and cultural heritage provides a promising framework for economic resilience and social cohesion. By focusing on sustainable practices and local involvement, these case studies demonstrate how inner areas can navigate the challenges of depopulation and economic decline, transforming potential obstacles into opportunities for growth and renewal.

Nevertheless, in these papers, the authors often overlook the potential risks of tourism as a solution to unemployment and depopulation in in-

ner areas. While tourism is frequently positioned as a tool to revitalize struggling communities and create job opportunities, the nuanced consequences of this growth are not adequately addressed. The emphasis tends to be on the immediate economic benefits, with little consideration for the long-term effects on social structures and local cultures. This gap in the literature is concerning, as it is crucial to recognize that the influx of tourists and related developments can lead to issues such as gentrification and displacement of long-time residents. The focus on attracting visitors can sometimes overshadow the needs of local populations, exacerbating inequalities rather than alleviating them. Furthermore, the reliance on tourism as a primary economic driver can create vulnerabilities, particularly during periods of crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which highlighted the fragility of tourism-dependent economies.

Various scholars have extensively examined the potential risks associated with tourism development and its implications for local communities. Giovanni Semi and Marta Tonetta (2021) highlight that while tourism can drive economic growth, it also poses significant risks that can adversely affect social cohesion and the well-being of residents. Simone Tulumello and Giovanni Allegretti (2021) further elaborate on how unchecked tourism expansion can lead to environmental degradation and strain local resources, ultimately compromising the quality of life for native inhabitants.

A central concern in this discourse is gentrification, a process identified by Ruth Glass (1964) as the transformation of neighbourhoods due to increasing property values and an influx of wealthier residents, often at the expense of long-standing local communities. In rural settings, this phenomenon takes on a distinct form known as rural gentrification. Several scholars (Parsons, 1980; Solana-Solana, 2010; Alonso González, 2017) have explored how rural gentrification can reshape demographic landscapes, as affluent newcomers displace local residents in pursuit of more desirable living conditions.

More recently, the concept of tourism-driven rural gentrification has emerged, emphasizing the dual role of tourism as both a catalyst for economic development and a contributor to social displacement. Xu *et al.* (2021) and Ma *et al.* (2024) consider how tourism can accelerate gentrification processes, particularly in rural areas that were previously overlooked. This research highlights the nuanced relation between tourism and gentrification, illustrating how the very developments aimed at attracting visitors can inadvertently lead to the exclusion of local populations.

The implications of these findings are profound. They underscore the need for a more sustainable approach to tourism that prioritizes the needs and rights of local communities. As tourism continues to be a vital sector

for many economies, particularly in regions where it constitutes a significant portion of GDP, the challenge remains to balance economic benefits with social equity. By adopting policies that foster community engagement and protect residents from displacement, stakeholders can work towards a model of tourism that not only enriches the local economy but also preserves the cultural and social fabric of the area.

## 2.2. *Tourism and the Ambivalences of Inland Areas*

Filippo Barbera (2024) and Barbera and Dagnes (2022) have highlighted the bourgeois, colonizing, and stereotypical nature of the constructed image of rural, inland and marginal areas. According to the authors, these areas are often aggregated into a single, undifferentiated entity characterized as picturesque spaces to be protected and promoted, where the bourgeoisie and urban elites project their desire to escape from the routines, hardships and pressure of daily life. As a result, these inland areas become places of retreat, where second homes are purchased to provide a refuge during pleasant seasons. Consequently, mountainous regions fill up in summer and empty out in winter, when snow renders them inhospitable, while coastal areas become targets of real estate speculation during the summer weeks, facilitated by platforms for short-term rentals.

This perspective offers a valuable starting point for critically examining the discursive production presented in the literature on Social Innovation in Tourism (SIT) reviewed in the previous sections of this chapter. This body of work tends to depict tourism as an opportunity, often overlooking the associated risks. Tourism is portrayed as a means of economic development, aimed at creating jobs and generating resources for environmental conservation, elements considered essential for maintaining a viable community in these areas. However, these elements alone are insufficient. Without the necessary infrastructure for daily life – such as schools, pharmacies, civil registries, shops, parks, and social spaces – these areas remain uninhabitable and merely commodities for affluent tourists (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2019).

To further explore these dynamics, it is useful to briefly discuss three case studies that remain underexplored in literature. The Tuscan countryside has become a prime destination for affluent British and American tourists who have settled in traditionally agricultural areas known for high-quality wine and olive oil production. This has resulted in a blend of local farming communities and new “villagers”, often digital nomads, artists, intellectuals, and entrepreneurs. Setenil de la Bodega, a pueblo blanco in the Sierra of Cádiz, has leveraged extensive marketing campaigns to attract

visitors, highlighting its unique rock-hewn architecture and thriving wine and agricultural production. However, the town itself has become almost exclusively tourism-oriented. Lastly, the Alpago area, located between Belluno and the Cansiglio plateau, has recently developed a tourism model centred around outdoor activities, wellness, and gastronomy, appealing to both affluent international visitors and fast-paced local tourism.

In part, this phenomenon has emerged due to a lack of capacity – or willingness – to recognize and accept the ambivalences it generates. The first ambivalence lies between the preservation of places and traditions and their commodification for tourists. When the former become fetishized or stereotypical souvenirs, the latter shifts from valorisation to the exploitation of the intrinsic value embedded in places and their traditions. The second ambivalence concerns the social composition of residents. These areas are inhabited by affluent tourists and holidaymakers alongside local workers with modest incomes derived from labour-intensive jobs, each group embodying different lifestyles, economic statuses, and levels of power. Integrating these social networks, which tend to develop along parallel lines due to the temporality of the tourist experience, becomes essential to prevent resource conflicts, where economic power from tourism clashes with the rootedness of the remaining locals. The third ambivalence pertains to the polysemy of the beautiful landscape. The marginal yet beautiful place is a simplified construct of images and perspectives that different actors hold about the same area. For some, it is a natural place that challenges residents, while for others, it is a wild sanctuary that dignifies nature: two contrasting visions of the same place, which is at once beautiful and harsh, brutal and natural, hostile and welcoming.

Conversely, this has led to the commodification and aestheticization of tradition, turning these territories into a “reserve” for a reflective middle or upper class seeking alternative destinations to replicate tourism dynamics. Moreover, this approach renders marginal places invisible, as they struggle to assert themselves within the frameworks of cultural and tourist commodification and aestheticization. Such areas are then depicted as in need of subsidies or revitalization strategies to make them attractive.

According to Barbera (2024), the solutions lie elsewhere, particularly in activities related to providing essential goods and services for the general well-being of the population: housing, education, elder care, healthcare, energy, and the local economy. After decades of neglect, these solutions require substantial investments in social innovation, which are challenging to produce due to the structural limitations of marginal areas, such as distance from services, a sparse economic framework, a weak democratic fabric, and fragile institutions, all of which are the antithesis of what is

necessary for innovation to flourish. Consequently, the everyday liveability of these places is crucial to empowering innovators.

The relation between strong and weak areas, centres and peripheries, and rural, mountain, and urban areas thus become central to envisioning forms of polycentric governance that avoid bureaucratic regionalism and instead embrace virtuous forms of municipalism. Here, enhancing and reforming public administration could be the cornerstone of a new territorial protagonism that meets the growing demand for human-centred places. This does not mean that everyone will move to small villages, but rather that the forms of interdependence between villages and cities will evolve.

Recognizing the ambivalence outlined above leads to a final reflection, balancing between recommendation and aspiration. To prevent tourism from becoming a tool for exploiting places, it is crucial to acknowledge that their developmental trajectories depend on the ability to build generative, rather than extractive, relations between actors (individuals, organizations, collectives), actants (technologies, infrastructures, ecosystems), and institutions (economic, political, socio-cultural) (Barbera, 2024). Only in this way can a territory cease to be a mere context or container of action or a physical space to be shaped according to objectives and become a vital agent in processes of transformation and social inclusion.

### *2.3. Vitality as Creative Fulfilment and Collective Flourishing*

Vitality, in the context of tourism and local development, navigates the complex ambivalences inherent in preserving the authenticity of places while simultaneously accommodating their economic potential (Sacchetti, Campbell, 2022; Nogués-Pedregal, 2020). The tension between maintaining cultural traditions and commodifying them for tourist consumption often risks reducing rich heritages to superficial attractions, thereby undermining their intrinsic value (MacCannell, 1973; Cohen, 1988). This dichotomy is mirrored in the socio-economic disparities within these communities, where affluent tourists and seasonal residents coexist with local workers who sustain the region through labour-intensive and often underpaid employment (Williams, Shaw, 1998; Ioannides, Petridou, 2016). These parallel social networks, if left unintegrated, can lead to conflicts over resources and cultural capital, driven by competing claims and differing visions of the same place (Mosedale, 2016; Bianchi, 2003). Moreover, the perception of a landscape's beauty is inherently subjective; what is seen as a challenging and resilient home for some may be romanticized as an untouched sanctuary for others (Urry, 1995; Edensor, 2006).

Vitality is defined as the capacity of an actor or a collective of actors to initiate and sustain actions that reflect their creativity and are aligned with both personal growth and the well-being of others (Sacchetti, 2022). It embodies the idea that true fulfilment and self-actualization arise from spontaneous, authentic actions that emerge naturally, without any pretension or coercion. This form of creativity is rooted in a genuine love for what one does and leads to both personal fulfilment and broader societal benefits (Maslow, 1963). It is driven by a dual motivation: a desire to address limitations or challenges (“what’s wrong”) and the imaginative capacity to envision new possibilities (“what’s right”). Unlike traditional problem-solving, vitality and creativity do not necessarily follow a rational or structured path but can manifest as “peak experiences”, moments of profound engagement and insight that transcend ordinary consciousness (Richards, Wilson, 2006). Self-realization through creativity transcends the traditional inner-outer dichotomy. Instead of a clear division between the internal and external worlds, the individual actively integrates and shapes external circumstances to reflect their authentic self. This dynamic interaction suggests that vitality is not simply about achieving external success or accumulating resources, but about the harmonization of personal aspirations with collective well-being (Duxbury, Richards, 2019).

Vitality is crucial for sustainable tourism development, as it embodies the ability of individuals and communities to engage actively and creatively in shaping their tourism experiences (Bramwell, Lane, 2013). When local communities feel empowered and inspired, they contribute their unique perspectives and talents, resulting in more authentic and enriching experiences for visitors (Cole, 2006). Vitality fosters cultural preservation, as engaged communities are more likely to share and protect their heritage, transforming tourism into a vehicle for cultural exchange rather than exploitation. Furthermore, it promotes innovative and sustainable practices that benefit both the environment and the economy, enabling communities to adapt to changing tourism trends and challenges (Duxbury, Richards, 2019). Ultimately, by prioritizing vitality, tourism development can enhance the overall quality of life for residents while creating meaningful and responsible experiences for tourists (Bramwell, Lane, 2013).

Importantly, the concept of vitality should not be conflated with competitiveness or material wealth. A firm may be highly competitive, yet lack vitality if its operations systematically undermine the potential and opportunities of its people. Similarly, an environment rich in resources may still lack vitality if its inhabitants are unable to express their creative potential or initiate meaningful actions, even when such actions could benefit both themselves and their communities (Richards, Wilson, 2006).

In alignment with sustainability principles, vitality must be understood within an ethical framework that excludes actions harmful to oneself, others, or society. Actions that contribute to vitality should therefore be nurturing and generative, promoting a sense of flourishing in respect of both the individual aspirations and the collective good. This perspective shifts the focus from merely economic or competitive metrics to a more holistic view of development, where vitality is measured by the ability to foster environments in which individuals and communities can thrive creatively and sustainably (Bramwell, Lane, 2013).

## Conclusions

The potential of Social Innovation in Tourism offers a promising avenue for revitalizing Mediterranean regions facing challenges like unemployment and depopulation for its inner areas, offering new possibilities for local communities while also protecting them from the risks of rural gentrification. Initiatives such as community-based tourism and eco-tourism can foster economic growth, social cohesion, and cultural preservation. By engaging local communities and encouraging them to take ownership of their tourism resources, these initiatives can lead to more equitable and inclusive distribution of benefits.

However, it is important to recognize the risks associated with tourism-driven gentrification. While tourism can attract financial investment and promote development, it can also result in the displacement of residents and the erosion of community identity. Scholars have noted that the influx of tourists can drive up property values, pushing out long-term residents in favour of short-term accommodations and tourist-centric facilities, thus disrupting the social fabric of these areas and undermining the community values that tourism aims to support.

Moreover, the assumption that tourism can universally address economic and social issues is problematic. A successful model in one region may lead to “disneyfication” in another, where authenticity is sacrificed for commercial purposes. This risk underscores the need for context-sensitive tourism strategies that respect the unique identities and cultural heritage of each area. Stakeholders – including policymakers, local governments, and community members – must critically evaluate existing tourism models to avoid creating shallow, commodified experiences that fail to reflect local realities.

The goal of sustainable tourism development should be to enhance the overall vitality of local communities. This means ensuring that the eco-

conomic benefits of tourism do not come at the cost of social and cultural integrity. A truly sustainable approach involves creating environments where local voices are prioritized and where tourism strategies contribute not just to economic resilience but also to social well-being. Vitality in this context refers not only to economic health but also to the social, cultural, and environmental aspects that shape a community's quality of life. Sustainable development must, therefore, strive to balance attracting visitors with preserving the unique characteristics that define a place.

Studies of tourism in rural and inner areas reveal the complexities and paradoxes inherent in leveraging tourism for development. As discussed above, tourism can be a desire, promising economic growth and cultural preservation, yet it can also become a mirage, offering only the illusion of prosperity while commodifying and displacing the very communities it aims to support. In some cases, it may even turn into a nightmare, exacerbating inequalities and disrupting local social fabrics.

Effective development strategies must go beyond short-term tourism gains, focusing instead on strengthening local infrastructure and fostering inclusive social and economic networks. Recognizing and addressing ambivalences – such as the tension between preservation and commodification, as well as the disparities between affluent visitors and local residents – is essential. By fostering generative rather than extractive relationships among all stakeholders, tourism can become a driver of sustainable and inclusive development, truly benefiting both residents and visitors alike.

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