

Sustainable Tourism Programme as part of Sustainable Development Agreements

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In the context of the Earth Summit in Rio, in 1994 the Dutch government signed three bilateral Sustainable Development Agreements (SDAs) with the governments of Benin, Bhutan and Costa Rica (see also van der Duim and Caalders, 2003). These agreements had two aims: to promote sustainable development and to establish a new pattern of relationships between a country in the North and three countries in the South. The most important part of the agreements is paragraph 1 of Article 1, which can be considered as the SDA mission (NIPS, 2003):

The two governments hereby agree to establish long-term cooperation between their countries based on equality and reciprocity as well as consultation and mutual assistance in order to pursue effectively all aspects of sustainable development, thereby promoting the participation of all interest groups in their respective countries.

The SDAs were conceived as treaties and thus as the responsibility of the government, but their implementation was delegated to external organizations, like Ecooperation in the Netherlands and Fundecooperacion in Costa Rica. A thorough evaluation of the SDAs in 2001 led to the conclusion that the contribution to sustainable development in the four countries had been limited and 'significantly lower than envisaged at the outset of the agreements'. But the SDAs had produced 'several remarkable initiatives that have the potential to make a contribution. This is particularly true of initiatives to influence policies, of participation, and for understanding of sustainable development among the public and policy-makers' (ITAD, 2001; see also Verhagen, 2005).

After the review of the SDAs in 2001, discussion led to changes of the mandate of Ecooperation, and in the summer of 2002 the Royal Tropical Institute (KIT) through its Netherlands International Partnership for Sustainability (NIPS) took over Ecooperation. In the SDA between Costa Rica and the Netherlands, tourism played a significant role.

A short history of the Tourism Programme

Within the SDAs, thematic programmes emerged from the various projects and policy dialogues. Tourism became one of the three programmes under the SDA between Costa Rica and the Netherlands. This Sustainable Tourism Programme (STP) has played a small but important role in the discussion on sustainable tourism development. Projects were executed on topics as Tourism and Biodiversity, Tourism Value Chains, Small and medium tourism enterprises and case studies in Manuel Antonio and Texel. The most important lessons and results were also presented at the Ecotourism Summit in Quebec by means of a CD-ROM (see Man et al., 2002) and were also disseminated by various persons and organizations participating in the implementation of the Sustainable Tourism Programme (STP).

In 1995, two technical committees on sustainable tourism were founded under the auspices of Ecooperation and Fundecooperacion. Private sector, public sector and non-governmental organizations as well as universities were represented in these committees. In May 1997, the two technical committees in Costa Rica and the Netherlands published a Sustainable Tourism Programme Costa Rica–Netherlands 1997-2000. Three main topics were identified in the programme:

- A. Criteria and accreditation;
- B. Tourism as an instrument for community development;
- C. Professionalization.

The programme and the identification of the main themes were the product of an extensive process of bilateral consultation and close cooperation between the Costa Rican and Dutch technical committees on tourism. The cooperation started at the 1995 workshop in San José, was intensified at the 1996 Workshop in Wageningen and resulted in this programme, which was finalized during consultations between the two technical committees in February-April 1997. The following overall objectives were formulated:

- To enhance the contributions of tourism to sustainable development;
- To achieve equity in the participation of actors in the tourism development process, with special attention for gender and social issues;
- To strengthen institutional and organizational capabilities and the skills and expertise of the local communities in order that they may develop themselves through tourism;
- To disseminate experiences with and knowledge about the relation between tourism and sustainable development within the framework of SDA countries as well as in other parts of the world;
- To bring about more inter-sectoral participation and cooperation through tourism;

- To create opportunities for bilateral projects on the basis of reciprocity;
- To make the relation between tourism and sustainable development operational at the local and regional levels;
- To improve the ability of the tourism sector to anticipate and adapt to the changing conditions in tourism with sustainable development as a guiding principle;

In January 1998, the Sustainable Tourism Programme was translated into a more concise Action Plan (The Costarican and Dutch technical committees on tourism, 1998; see also Van der Duim and Caalders, 2000) in which the contribution of tourism to community development was set as the main concern. The priorities were:

- To develop transferable methodologies. Linking the experiences related to community development through tourism in the Netherlands and Costa Rica in general and those under the Costa Rican and Dutch action plans in particular, with the aim of solving problems and accumulating knowledge through learning by doing;
- To identify criteria for sustainable tourism: development of criteria and the outlines of a accreditation system for small entrepreneurs and community projects, based on experiences gained in Costa Rica and the Netherlands and in other comparable systems.
- To develop and implement 'train the trainer' programmes: training the intermediaries who are or should be involved in transferring knowledge to the people involved.

Two small bilateral projects were started in 1996, but the main projects were launched in 1999. In total, ten bilateral projects have been carried out since the start of the cooperation between the two countries in 1995 (for an evaluation of these projects, see: Crul, 2002 and CECADE, 2002).

Lessons learned

Crul (2002: 13) evaluates the Sustainable Tourism Programme (STP) as:

A pioneer, innovative initiative supported by dedicated sustainable tourism organizations in both countries that had to deal with starting problems related to the fact that the Sustainable Development Agreement was a completely new way of working in the relation between Costa Rica and the Netherlands and that the development of new rules and procedures took longer than anticipated. In addition the participating organisations in both countries had to establish – with ups and downs – a working relationship based on the three principles of the Agreement and mutual trust in each other's intentions, agendas and involvement.

Crul's evaluation identified the following best practices related to the tourism programme (ibid.: 19):

- The approach used by the technical committees and their individual members in promoting the STP and the SDA and disseminating its results;
- The use of annual work plans and reports of the technical committees in the period 1995-2000;
- The pioneer role within the SDA with respect to the participation of stakeholders in the development of the STP;
- The selection of themes within the STP focused the STP on priority areas for intervention;
- The overview of the sustainable tourism networks in the Netherlands, which provided an excellent starting point for linking Dutch sustainability tourism initiatives with activities abroad;
- The initiative of both technical committees to organize an international conference at which the lessons learned will be exchanged;
- Active financial support from Ecooperation for the implementation of annual work plans.

However, what started as an interesting experiment was only partially successful. First of all, it did not receive the support it needed to flourish (see also Verhagen, 2005). As ITAD (2001) observed:

The political drive that started the process withered away at a critically early stage. Secondly, the founders failed to match the SDA objectives with new rules and procedures. Thirdly, despite the rhetoric of equality, it has proved difficult to shake off the traditional relationships of the aid donor and recipient, and the Dutch have dominated the process, including the evaluation.

As a consequence, project approvals were slow and complicated. Moreover, especially Dutch private tourism organizations did not chip in, partly because of the institutional barriers mentioned above, and partly because of a lack of interest.

Although the SDAs in general and the Sustainable Tourism Programme (STP) in particular have been in the line of fire, in 2003 the Netherlands International Partnership for Sustainability (NIPS) initiated a new start. In line with the evaluation of Crul (2002), participants proposed scaling up the experiment and broadening the STP with new themes and/or new countries. Moreover, they suggested (see van der Duim and Caalders, 2003):

- Not only to extend the STP to Bhutan and Benin, but also to create intra-regional linkages (between e.g. Costa Rica and Nicaragua; Benin and Ghana; Bhutan and Nepal);
- To link the STP to other initiatives of international donor organizations, notably the SNV Netherlands Development Organisation, the United Nations Environmental Program, the World Wildlife Fund and the Convention on Biodiversity;
- To link the STP to the other SDA programmes, i.e. sustainable trade, biodiversity and gender.

Moreover, based on the experiences with the STP, they seconded many of the lessons learned from other programmes (see NIPS, 2003) and advocated leadership of NIPS, in order to build up policy support, credibility and a good profile. This required moulding the four SDA countries into a leading coalition for the new STP and creating an enabling environment. The leading coalition should function as a node in a broader context of global networking (see also Crul, 2002: 22).

Secondly, as it is important to create a critical mass, the STP needed not only broadening to include more countries and new themes, but also programmatic coherence so that initiatives are not scattered. Finally, it aimed to create learning platforms and mechanisms. In addition to actual exchanges, the learning platforms should facilitate Internet-based collaborative learning. As Crul (2002) also suggested, new and innovative information and communication technologies could improve the interaction and the information and knowledge exchange between the actively involved stakeholders, and communication with other interested sustainable tourism organizations.

All these proposals were discussed at a quadrilateral conference on Texel, in November 2004. Twenty-five participants, representing the four sectors (private sector, government, NGOs and universities) from the four SDA countries discussed the way forward. It was decided to initiate a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, which should be linked up with the Sustainable Tourism – Eliminating Poverty (STEP) programme of the SNV Netherlands Development Organisation and the World Tourism Organisation, which signed a Memorandum of Understanding in the same year in The Hague. In the meanwhile, two new projects started, one on certification – which also included the participation of Dutch and Costa Rican tour operators – the other on policy and legislation for sustainable tourism development. However, the Dutch government withdrew from the DOVs in 2005 (Verhagen, 2005), which also implied to end of Dutch involvement in the STP. After that Costa Rica and Bhutan continued to work together for many years in the field of sustainable tourism.

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