Residents' perceptions of the impact of tourism in rural areas

Abstract

Purpose: this paper aims to provide an understanding of residents' perceptions of how tourism activity in a rural area impacts their environment as well as their economic and social lives individually, and as a community.

Design/Methodology/Approach: as a primary method of data collection, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 residents in the rural areas of Cyprus.

Findings: the study's findings suggest that tourism activity in the rural areas provides a plethora of opportunities to residents, but comes with challenges and threats. Both social and environmental impacts are mainly for the benefit of the local communities as the engine of development. Emphasis is given to the revival of the local culture with the emergence of small and medium enterprises, along with the motivation of younger populations and women to become active entrepreneurs. However, a more holistic approach should be taken to sustainable tourism development in Cyprus, ensuring that all local communities have an opportunity to develop small-scale niche tourism products that enhance the image of rural destinations, and which become a source of pride for the residents.

Originality/Value: the study contributes to the literature by enhancing knowledge of the relationship between tourism and local rural communities. Shedding light on residents' perceptions by evaluating social and environmental impacts can guide government policy making and implementation.

Keywords: Rural areas, residents' perceptions, Cyprus, semi-structured interviews, impacts

Introduction

Globally, tourism is considered an important economic and social activity that contributes 10.4% to the World's Gross Domestic Product (World Travel and Tourism Council 2019). Given the contribution of tourism, arguably it affects the lives of people resident in popular destinations. However, not all residents have similar perceptions of the contribution of tourism to their area/region. Perceptions vary according to the way tourism is viewed and how it impacts the socioeconomic status of the area (Segota, Mihalic and Kuscer 2017). In the context of tourism, the examination and definition of residents' perceptions involves the attitude and opinions of how tourism is experienced and lived (Smith and Spencer 2020; Chiu, Chan and Marafa 2016; Rasoolimanesh, Jaafar, Kock and Ramayah 2015). In general, stakeholders in tourism are interested groups of people that are highly affected and influenced by it (Diedrich and Garcia-Buades 2009). Residents are considered to be the most important actors, whose views and opinions must by prioritised so that tourism can act for their benefit.

Investigating residents' perceptions is a popular theme in tourism research, and can shed light on the way government bodies act with regard to viable tourism development (Liasidou 2021). There are ample studies investigating the factors affecting and influencing residents' attitudes and

perceptions of tourism (Rua 2020; Chiu et al. 2016; Rasoolimanesh et al. 2015). Residents prioritise the economic benefits emanating from tourism, along with ways of getting involved with the industry. The current paper provides an analysis of residents' perceptions of rural areas in relation to social and environmental impacts from tourism. Specifically, the opinions of the locals are decoded to provide an understanding of the way tourism is perceived. The study is applied to the case of Cyprus, an island state destination that is highly reliant on tourism. Over the last years, national tourism policies in Cyprus have been framed within the aims of sustainability, since as a destination it has reached the saturation stage of development, and therefore must mitigate problems caused by tourism.

Theoretical background

In tourism literature, there are debates in defining sustainable-responsible tourism as a context in tourism policy that makes implementation more perplexed (Butler 2018; Tolkes 2018; Mihalic 2016). As Young (1973) adroitly argues, whether tourism is a blessing or blight, sustainability has come to the fore as the concept in tourism that should be perceived as a blessing. The most common definition of sustainability is from the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), where it is defined as 'satisfying the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs' (WCED 1987, Ch 2, Sec. 1, para. 1). Sustainability is associated with ensuring that a place benefits from tourism development without wasting the resources. In other words, it is providing a holistic approach that brings benefits to the locals, whereas any negative occurrence is not sustainable (Higgs-Desbiolles 2018). Policy making deploys content from sustainability initiatives by emphasising development that prioritises positive impacts emanating from tourism focussed on the environment, and social and economic life. Sustainable or responsible tourism is basically concerned with an emphasis on preserving local resources, with a locus point of concern for the welfare and wellbeing of the residents (Butler 1993). By proclaiming sustainability initiatives, a destination attempts to regain its competitiveness (López-Sáncheza and Pulido-Fernández 2016). Basically, sustainable tourism deals with the ethical way of introducing and developing tourism in a geographical area. Additionally, sustainability is mostly associated with rural areas as the vehicle to gauge tourism development by ensuring multilayer effects (Liasidou 2018).

Rural areas act as the places that sustainability can be maintained, and is a strategy that can preserve both cultural and natural resources. Residents are the main protagonists to be directly affected by any type of tourism development (Segota, et al. 2017; Gannon, Rasoolimanesh and Taheri 2021). Thus, their voices must be heard since they interact with tourists, and at the same time their cultural heritage consists of their pride (Rua 2020). Through the drafting of tourism policies, government authorities feel urged to ensure that rural areas are enhanced with the aim of increasing tourism demand. The aim should be to adjust to the needs of the residents in order to benefit them economically, socially, and environmentally (López-Sáncheza and Pulido--Fernandez 2016). The inability to shape tourism as a vehicle for positive impacts creates irritation to locals, who consider tourists as enemies and tourism development as unwelcome (Charag, Fazili and Bashir 2020). Undoubtedly, destinations that have a holistic approach in tourism development prioritise residents needs instead of visitor needs (Tölkes 2018). In most cases, there is a gap in the way tourism is perceived by residents as the main stakeholders, and the government. This gap can only close when the government sets up policies that are based on residents' social, economic, and environmental interests as a motivation to preserve their area.

In the repository of tourism research, there are ample studies that examine residents' perceptions. Residents' perceptions are set as the cornerstone in understanding and evaluating the degree to which tourism development is positive or negative (Chiu, Chan and Marafa 2016). Coordinated efforts of tourism development are necessitated, especially in destinations highly reliant on tourism, such as in the case of small islands that have fragile ecosystems (Martın, Moreira and Roman 2020). However, the main argument in tourism is that there are two sides of the coin where tourism can bring both negative and positive impacts. Sharpley (2014:48) asserts that the benefits cannot be achieved without costs, and that:

> 'host communities usually face an important dilemma when evaluating these benefits and costs as some of them are intangible and do not have a market value.'

By considering various areas as case studies, extant research provides deep understanding of the perception of locals on the impacts of tourism. In Charag, Fazili and Bashir's (2020) paper considering the Kashmir in India, research results suggest that the aim of destinations should be to sensitise locals to tourism development. In other words, locals should be part of the development and be involved in the way their area is changing. Cardoso and Silva (2018) discussed the fact that understanding residents' perceptions can provide guidance to policymakers and planners for future tourism development. Another study worth mentioning is by Nunkoo and So (2016), who used various models of tourism development to test residents' perceptions of the Niagara Region, Canada. The results of their study are significant in that they indicate that residents' perceptions are influenced and motivated when there are positive impacts from tourism.

There are various concpetions of tourism development as a subjective process, with everyone perceiving either positive or negative effects. A high dependency on tourism, however, includes many threats, especially when there are incidents or crises that can disrupt tourism (Diedrich and Garcia-Buades 2009; Hateftabar and Chapuis 2020). Given that this as an important aspect of the discussion in tourism, areas with an exclusive dependency on tourism seem to be vulnerable. This implies that local communities can suffer from tourism, either because of high or low demand. Thus, perceptions can be varied, and are strongly related to dependency on the tourism industry (Martın, Moreira and Roman 2020).

A key additional aspect in tourism is the various stakeholders involved, and the pursuit of an effective and unbiased collaboration. Evidently, by creating strong collaborative networks, a destination can achieve a harmonious symbiosis, and all members involved can benefit from tourism (Bramwell and Sharman 1999). As emphasised by these authors (1999:392) 'collaboration improves the coordination of policies and related actions, and promotes consideration of the economic, environmental, and social impacts of tourism'. Thus, through collaboration, dichotomies can be minimised and create a favourable ground for tourism development in rural areas (Martın et al. 2020). The main ingredients that motivate tourism in peripheral/rural areas are associated with culture, natural scenery, and the way of life. Thus, tourism policy should promote local interests, and thwart any development that destroys or deteriorates the area's characteristics. The next section discusses tourism initiatives on the island of Cyprus.

The case of Cyprus

Cyprus presents an interesting case in tourism literature that has been investigated from different perspectives. Examining this micro-island state's local perception of tourism has many implications for the social, environmental, and economic effects (Martın et al. 2020; Liasidou 2015, Liasidou 2018a). Rural areas are considered to be ideal for tourism because of their unique features that can provide the essence of cultural characteristics. In 2019, Cyprus received 3,976,800 tourists who spent $3,245 million. Unfortunately, in 2020, tourism arrivals were down to 631,609, which represented a decrease of 84.1%. This sharp decline was due to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) (Statistical Service of the Republic of Cyprus 2020). The main source of tourists is the United Kingdom with 33.5%, followed by Russia (17.4%), and Israel (7.4%).

In 2017 Cyprus launched the 'National Tourism Strategy 2017–2030' 'develop Cyprus' '[to grow] tourism in a sustainable way, which positively impacts our economy, our society and the environment' (Deputy Ministry of Tourism 2017:20). However, tourism stakeholders have recognised the inability of Cyprus to become a sustainable destination because of a lack of solid partnerships among the public and private sectors, along with a lack of consistent quality in the frameworks of development. Additionally, the island faces an acute problem of seasonality because of the sea, sun, and sand tourism product, which has a high concentration in coastal areas in summer months (Liasidou 2018). Having acknowledged the main problems, the government stated their mission to be:

> Ensuring that tourism will improve the quality of life of the local population while preserving their local identities and inspiring greater confidence in their future. (Deputy Ministry of Tourism 2017:22.)

The profile of the rural areas of Cyprus consist of small, picturesque villages that have Christian orthodox churches of historic value, taverns, accommodation establishments, and small to medium enterprises selling cultural products. Most of the villages are part of the wine and religious routes along with the nature routes. As geographical areas, they are considered to be of impeccable beauty that present the essence of the Cypriot philoxenia tradition.

It is an interesting fact that the official tourism authority of Cyprus, the Deputy Ministry of Tourism (formerly the Cyprus Tourism Organization since January 1, 2019), conducted an extensive study of the social impacts of tourism in 2005 (Cyprus Tourism Organization 2005). As mentioned above, decoding the social impact originating from tourism can guide tourism development. The results of the study suggest that locals are considered a priority by tourism authorities to benefit from any development in tourism. In 1996, an initiative from the Cyprus Tourism Organization encouraged rural area residents to apply for subsidies to traditionally restore old houses (aged 100–300 years) with the option of them being converted into rural accommodation (Cyprus Agrotourism Company n.d). The entrance of Cyprus into the European Union (the EU) on 1ˢᵗ May, 2004 was a major development that encouraged rural area residents to

engage in tourism. By becoming a member of the EU, Cyprus gained access to the European Structural and Investment Funds with special schemes for the restoration of rural areas (European Network for Rural Development (ENRD n.d.).

Methodology

To address the research question of this article and understand the residents' perceptions of sustainable tourism development and its impact on rural areas of Cyprus, authors conducted semi-structured interviews with 20 residents from the villages of Larnaca, Nicosia, Limassol, and Paphos districts (Table 1). A semi-structured interview is a tool widely used in tourism research, especially when exploring perceptions of either residents or visitors (Poria et al., 2013). Purposive and snowball sampling was used for the purpose of this study. These two sampling methods were chosen because they allowed us to explore the perception of a specific group of people. The aim of the study is to understand local perceptions in relation to tourism development in the villages of Cyprus. Residents of rural areas are considered a group that is usually hard-to-reach. As TenHouten proposed (2017) snowball sampling is a natural solution for collecting data from individuals in hard-to-reach communities.

Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and the interview protocol was designed to include main theme questions as related to benefits, threats, and opportunities and follow up questions (Table 2). As suggested by McLellan et al. (2003), in order to systematically organise data, all interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was then carried out, as in the work of Smith and Spencer (2020), that answers the aim and research questions of the study (Table 3).

[Insert Table 1 here]

Table 1: Respondents

Interviewee	District		Age Range	Education
Local I	Larnaca	Female	40- 49	Master's degree
Local II	Nicosia	Male	40 -49	Master's degree
Local III	Nicosia	Male	30 -39	Master's degree
Local IV	Larnaka	Female	50- 59	High school
Local V	Limassol	Male	40 -49	Bachelor's degree
Local VI	Larnaka	Female	30-39	Bachelor's degree
Local VII	Larnaca	Male	<60	Master's Degree
Local VIII	Nicosia	Female	30-39	PhD
Local IX	Larnaca	Male	50-59	PhD
Local X	Limassol	Female	30-39	Bachelor's degree
Local XI	Larnaca	Male	40-49	Bachelor's degree
Local XII	Nicosia	Female	40-49	Bachelor's degree
Local XIII	Paphos	Female	50-59	Bachelor's degree
Local XIV	Larnaca	Male	50-59	High School
Local XV	Limassol	Female	18-29	Master's Degree
Local XVI	Limassol	Male	18-29	Bachelor's degree
Local XVII	Limassol	Female	40-49	Bachelor's Degree
Local XVIII	Limassol	Male	50 -59	Master's degree
Local XIX	Limassol	Female	40-49	Diploma
Local XX	Larnaca	Male	18-29	Graduate student

Source: Authors

[Insert Table 2 here]

Table 2: Interview protocol - indicative content

Theme: Residents' Perceptions of Tourism – development / impacts
Has tourism activity become more intense in your area in recent years (especially pre-COVID)?
Are you satisfied with the tourism development in your area? Yes or no (please elaborate).
Do you believe that the tourism development is aligned with the social and environmental characteristics of the area?
Do you perceive more benefits than costs from the tourism development in your area?
Do you believe that infrastructure improvements of your area is because of tourism?
Do you believe that tourism creates more opportunities for women/young people?
Do you believe that the government support/guide tourism development in an appropriate manner?
Resident's perceptions – lifestyle, eating habits, attitudes
Do you feel that tourists are threats to your lifestyle and local culture?
Do you believe there is pride in your local culture because of tourism?

Do you have a positive attitude to/ behaviour towards the current tourism development in your area?

How does the tourism activity impact (change) your life in terms of:
   1. lifestyle/habits/?
      2. eating patterns?

Do you believe that tourism development threatens family structures or creates gender inequalities?

Source: Authors

[Insert Table 3 here]

Table 3: Thematical analysis

Perceptions		
Tourism as a positive trend	Tourism as a negative trend	
Threats from tourism	Opportunities from tourism	
Changes of lifestyle	Change of eating habits/attitudes	Appreciating tourism activities
Revival of the culture	Social and cultural pride	
Availability of government support		

Source: Authors

Research Findings

The results of the study are indicative and suggest various opinions on tourism development in rural areas. As mentioned, the island of Cyprus is highly reliant on tourism, thus the lives of locals are directly affected. Locals' opinions converge on the fact that tourism can bring both negative and positive aspects to an area. It is interesting that most of the respondents expressed concerns about the role of the government in terms of the planning and development strategies for rural areas. Sustainability initiatives, as described in the Cypriot tourism policy, should act for the benefit of rural areas, by promoting local products and local culture. However, there is a long way to go for Cyrus to become a truly sustainable destination that can bring benefits to the peripheral areas. The results are presented below through thematic analysis, based on the interviews capturing local perceptions.

Tourism as a positive trend and as a negative trend

In general, research participants appreciated the positive impacts that can be brought to an area from tourism. Each interviewee summarised the impact of tourism in their area using expressions like 'triggered economic development'(Local XIX), 'gave motivation to young people to stay in the village' (Local XX), and 'income generator' (Local XII). The below excerpt is representative:

> Yes, of course. The development goes hand in hand with the social and environmental characteristics of our area. An example is a stone we use to construct some of our houses (especially the old ones) or the public spaces (parks, amphitheatres, courts). You can see this specific stone everywhere. Even for the new projects, we still use the same stone to keep consistency and protect the unique characteristics of the village.

Local XI

Tourism is perceived as a positive enterprise in rural areas, and has a multiplier effect (Rasoolimanesh 2015). Locals appreciate the fact that their village is attractive to foreigners because of its various elements that make it unique. Local XII mentioned that:

> due to tourism, the restoration of a lot of buildings and houses took place during the recent years and this development has attracted many guests, both locals, and foreigners… some hotels have also been renovated and have led to the development of the village.

Local XVI referred to tourism as the reason that they stayed in the village because of the opportunities that tourism can create for young people. Respondents were eloquent in mentioning that there are also negative effects because the development is not always aligned with the rural life of the village.

> Recently I heard of plans to build large shopping malls in my area. I hope it will not destroy local shops, cafes, restaurants. It poses the risk of becoming too commercial and losing the local identity.
>
> Local IV

Additionally, there was a concern expressed that villages in the Troodos Mountain are highly dependent on tourism. The problem is due to low demand, which is apparent during their winter months. Locals have realised that they have to diversify their business activities, and find ways to generate other revenue sources, especially with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic that has prevented any tourism activity. A participant stated that:

> I think a lot of effort is needed, and there is a lot of room for improvement. The locals fully depend on tourism, and it is dangerous. We see now that with all the restrictions and everything, depending too much on tourism was the wrong choice.
>
> Local VIII

This issue is a problem for many destinations that have seasonal tourist cycles (Rua 2020). Thus, the authorities should have plans and policies high on their agenda that enable the diversification of tourism activities, and that generate all year-round demand. The government role seems to be weak because of an inability to impose development strategies and incentives that can outweigh negative impacts with positive ones.

Threats and opportunities

The main threats emanate from the negative impact caused in the case of an unplanned or unauthorised development in the areas. Basically, respondents mentioned 'water pollution' or 'the lack of coordinated actions of development'. Additionally, there are incidents where tourists, who are visiting and staying in the village, have behaved in ways that harass locals. An indicative example as a threat to tourism is reflected in the quote below:

For example, there are high school students coming to the area for the weekend. It is one of the programmes developed to improve tourism in the region. These students come with one aim—to party. They spray historical places, destroy stuff, they do not have any respect for the region, its history.

Local VIII

The example below is also representative:

I have seen how partying tourists destroy houses, streets, get all wild and crazy. It is not the type of tourist I want to see in my country.

Local X

The above raises concerns regarding the habits of tourists visiting rural areas. What is needed is to ensure that visitors to rural areas respect the surrounding pristine environments, along with the peaceful lives of the residents.

In the case of opportunities arising from tourism, residents eloquently argued that there are many financial and social benefits. Local III states:

I truly believe that tourism is an opportunity to bring family members together, especially if we're talking about a family business, for example.

Another excerpt worth mentioning is as follows:

as the role of women is changing, more and more women are opening … small businesses (that mainly provide tourism services or products).

Local IV

However, there has been disappointment in terms of the government authorities' concentration on developing specific areas/villages. Locals feel that there is discrimination in terms of tourism development, and that the full potential of areas has not been explored (Diedrich and Garcia-Buades 2009). Local XI's statement is representative:

Tourism has been indicated as a good development strategy for rural areas in Cyprus, but unfortunately, development has been relatively low for the village. Maybe this is because the development of the neighbouring villages did not allow our village to grow as they did. The authorities might not have enough resources to help us develop, too. However, new roads were constructed, and I have not lost heart in my belief that some other park redevelopment projects will start soon.

However, the Cypriot government's pursuit of sustainable tourism will hopefully achieve holistic development, that can enhance the country by fulfilling all of its potential and ensure social and economic viability.

The change of attitudes, lifestyle, and eating habits.

Undoubtedly, tourism activity can introduce new habits to an area (Rua 2020). Interview results are indicative, and provide an insight into local perceptions in relation to new habits, lifestyles, and attitudes. Local XV suggested that:

> Tourism has changed my mindset, but not my lifestyle. I catch myself being more open to all cultures, and appreciate and respect the differences of every person. I refer to biological differences too. When visiting my tavern, I want to make them [the tourists] feel at home, and I do not see them as customers. A few years ago, I wasn't like that.

Interacting with other cultures influences people's acceptance and appreciation and contributes to mutual understanding. The main argument concerning eating habits is that locals discovered and have explored the gastronomy and cuisine of Cyprus by offering alternative traditional dishes to foreign visitors. Additionally, restaurants and taverns have introduced new concepts in dining, with the example below as representative:

> Brunch has been introduced in our restaurant menu to meet our visitor's needs. It was something that a lot of people were asking for.

> Local X

Exploring food traditions by presenting dishes with local ingredients gives an identity to the place, and residents can become more connected to their cultural roots and traditions. Traditional gastronomy and cuisine are sought out by visitors as a way of learning about the place. Another important aspect is that food culture is combined with the rich wine culture, especially for the villages in the Limassol district.

Cultural revival and pride

Promoting cultural elements in tourism has various benefits for destinations (Liasidou 2018). There is a regeneration of cultural characteristics that are presented in traditional cuisine, food/sweets, and handicrafts. An eloquent respondent stated:

> Providing a restaurant experience with local food and wine becomes a part of the image of Cyprus.

> Local IX

Additionally, respondent XI observed that:

> Through traditional food, we demonstrate our culture, our hospitality, our own identity.

The below excerpt is also indicative:

> Many people want to learn about our religion, traditions, cuisine, and daily routine. Thus, they visit our area to improve their knowledge and have a unique experience regarding our cultural heritage. At the same time, we are also learning from this experience, and we are trying to learn, even more, and find useful information to share with them, going the extra mile to demonstrate the warm hospitality that is a part of our cultural heritage.

Local VI

Thus, cultural revival and pride deals with 'image', 'identity', and exchange of learning through cultural demonstration. Cultural pride is synonymous with the pride of the locals who have a feeling of sharing. As stated below:

We feel proud of our culture and there is a need to share this with tourists. They even feel that they are always welcome.

Local XIII

This is in addition to the fact that a focus on culture provides a '…different angle on life in Cyprus, an angle that is different but interesting and full of experiences' (Local XII).

An interesting example is included below:

I even remember a group of tourists who visited Lofou on a wedding day. When we have a wedding here, all the villagers participate in the process from early in the morning until the next day. The tourists did not understand what was going on. Once I explained to them what was happening, they immediately ran to the couple, asked them to stay, and bought a present for them from a local shop. They did not stop dancing until late. They were fascinated by our culture and the way we do things.

The following excerpt emphatically underlines the whole essence of the exchange between tourists and locals: 'It will always be a revival if we have people interested in our culture' (Local IX).

The above suggests that involvement in tourism benefits the locals because they are consequently motivated to present and promote their cultural heritage. Sustainability is indeed a way of displaying the unique characteristics of a place.

Availability of government support

In the case of the government's role, respondents argued that rural areas constitute a part of the tourism development. A respondent highlighted that:

the responsible authorities did quite a good job in trying to sustainably develop our areas, while not harming our social, cultural, and natural environment.

Another important aspect of government support is the EU funding as described below:

Without any funds, the development might not be a success. For example, several EU funds supported our goal for the restoration of our village.

Local V

The local authorities of the rural areas have an important role to play through encouraging tourism development as below:

Fifteen years ago, I was thinking that this village had nothing to offer, and the investment opportunities were minor. But today, I understand how wrong I was. Our mayor has contributed to that development. He had the vision to see the village growing but at the same time [he was able to] maintain its local character and identity.

Local VI

Additionally, indicative quotes include statements like 'the government needs to invest in road infrastructure to make our village accessible' (Local XIX). Also, Local VII said, 'further improvements are needed in the area to be promoted by the government's campaigns'. Local XIV stated that:

> I believe that there is always room for improvement. Larnaka Tourism Board does a very good job in this regard to promote villages and businesses found in rural areas.

Additionally, Local XVII suggested that:

> The government can promote UNESCO heritage religious sites that are in many villages and promote the wealth of Christian Orthodoxy.

Locals urge the government to listen to their concerns and establish a network of rural villages as popular destinations, with activities expanded throughout the year. The rich historic and religious heritage, and the unique natural and social environment should be promoted. Furthermore, incentives involving financial assistance are needed for women and the young population to exploit opportunities and enter the tourism industry. Local XVI mentioned:

> as a holder of a hotel management degree, I want to find an opportunity in my village through tourism.

Education is the key to encouraging locals to enter the industry so they can learn about the benefits that can be gained. The respondent below adroitly mentioned:

> by organising some networking events or seminars, the local authorities can bring all the 'people of tourism' together…we can work on our skills, share our concerns, and discuss possibilities for future collaborations that will benefit our village (or even our country).

The creation of stronger collaboration networks will empower rural residents to pursue the aims of sustainability. Without getting locals involved, any government plans will not succeed (Segota et al. 2017).
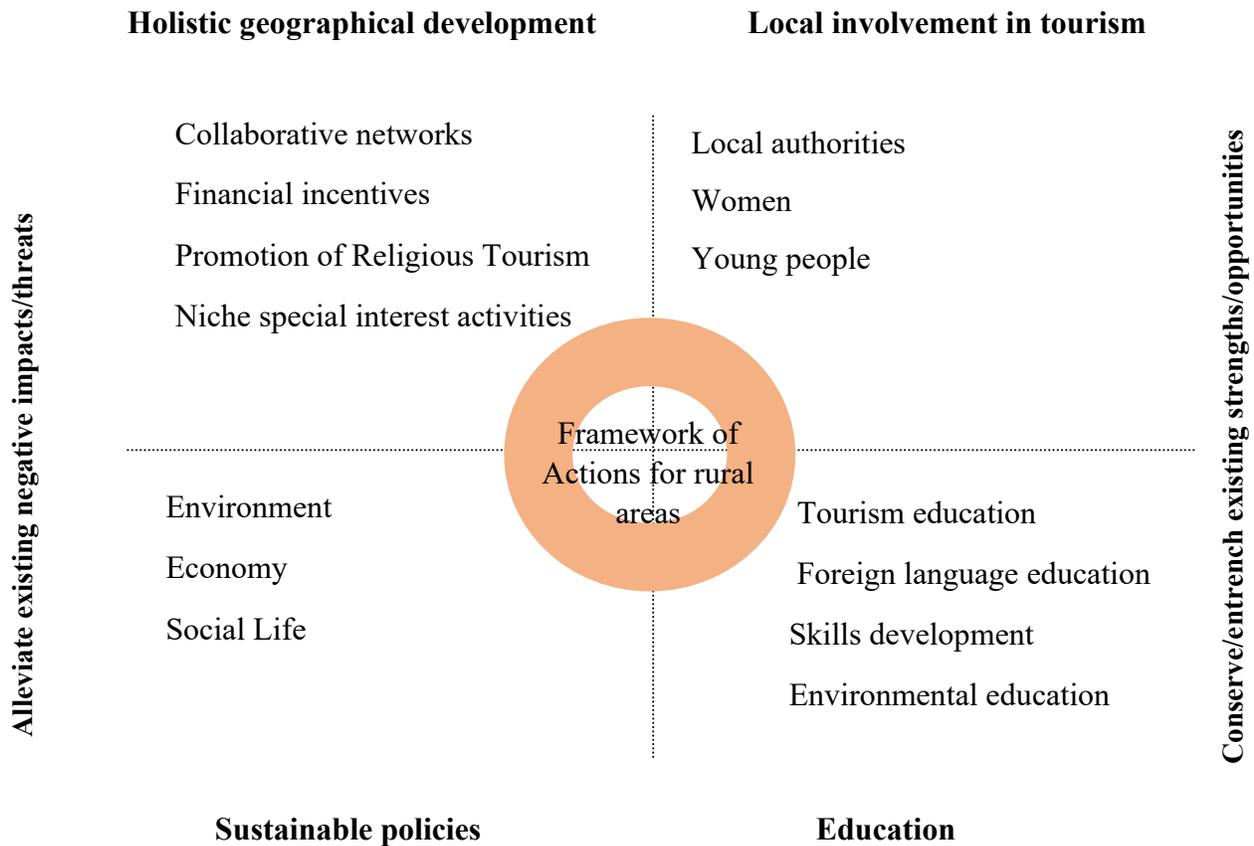
Conclusion

In this study, the perception of locals towards tourism was investigated in the rural areas of Cyprus. The study employed semi-structured interviews with locals and aimed to conceptualise and understand local attitudes towards tourism. Locals consider tourism to be a positive trend in their areas but they expressed concerns about the official government authorities, who, they believe, must apply more effective policies and plans. There are gaps between rural areas in terms of development. This is due to the lack of a holistic approach to development that is able to involve and encourage all communities. Locals have argued that tourism has all the prerequisites for developing rural areas, and can provide residents with economic and financial benefits. Government and EU funds have enabled locals to set up their businesses in rural areas. The main benefits gained are that cultural identity is promoted and there is an intense sense of pride.

Locals are getting involved in tourism by setting up their small and medium business outlets, mainly restaurants and accommodation units. Understanding local perceptions can shed light on the area's needs, and guide the government to providing a development aligned to them (Gannon et al 2021; Rua 2020). Rural planning and development are necessary to create a network involving

all the villages as part of tourism, since there is the potential to promote religious heritage, culture, and gastronomy. Countries that manage to benefit residents with social development policies within the aims of sustainable tourism ensure their future viability and success. There are multiple benefits to generating tourism demand in rural areas, for instance the alleviation of the problem of urbanisation, the revival of cultural pride, and the enhancement of the lives of rural residents. Rural areas are ideal for the development of micro-scale niche products that can satisfy tourists who are more demanding in their holidays. This is also important for Cyprus, a destination that needs to solve the problem of seasonality. In order for this to be achieved, national authorities must develop a framework of actions for implementation in the rural areas (Figure 1). The aims of sustainability will only be fulfilled with a holistic approach to development, and with the involvement of locals through a strong collaborative network.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

Figure 1: Framework of Actions for rural areas

Holistic geographical development   **Local involvement in tourism**

Collaborative networks   Local authorities

Financial incentives   Women

Promotion of Religious Tourism Young people

Niche special interest activities

Framework of Actions for rural areas

Environment

Economy   Tourism education

Social Life   Foreign language education

                                Skills development

                                Environmental education

Alleviate existing negative impacts/threats

Conserve/entrench existing strengths/opportunities

Sustainable policies   **Education**

Source: Author

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