

# Effects of Covid-19 pandemic on application of community-based tourism as a type of social intervention

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## Abstract.

Community-based tourism is used in many countries as a powerful tool for societal development. Traditionally, tourism itself has been studied as a way of organizing the offer of special services connected to a place, activity or territory. In addition, one of the characteristics of this sphere is its linkage with society that is involved in it in different modes. It is necessary to plan touristic activities the way they can help to develop the territory, and community-based tourism serves as one of the powerful tools in that case.

It is based on the principle that individual cultures and the environment are barely protected and do not interact. The community-based tourists have a chance to not only observe the traditions, values and way the local communities leave, but also take active part in them. At the same time, such approach permits the community itself to develop and grow using its own potential and resources. This type of activities tends to increase the level of awareness, understanding and respect for the tourists and for residents.

Moreover, community-based tourism opens new opportunities by creating new workplaces, forming and guaranteeing different ways for local development. It impacts the life of local population in its cultural, social, political and economic diversity by attracting investments, visitors and encouraging residents to try new forms of work.

In present article we are aiming to evaluate the effect Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown had on community-based tourism. The community support and social action as one of its forms will also be discussed. We will base ourselves on evidence from employees of that sector. By doing such analysis we plan to elaborate a set of suggestions that will help to restore the application of community-based tourism as a social intervention tool.

## Keywords.

community-based tourism, Covid-19, community support, social action, social intervention

## Resumen.

*El turismo comunitario se aplica en muchos países como una herramienta poderosa para el desarrollo social. Tradicionalmente, el propio turismo ha sido estudiado como una forma de organizar la oferta de servicios especiales relacionados con un lugar, actividad o territorio. Además, una de las características de este ámbito es su vinculación con la sociedad que se involucra en él de diferentes modos. Es necesario planificar las actividades turísticas de manera que puedan ayudar al desarrollo del territorio, y el turismo comunitario sirve como una de las herramientas poderosas en ese caso. Se basa en el principio de que las culturas individuales y el medio ambiente apenas están protegidos y no interactúan. Los turistas comunitarios tienen la oportunidad no solo de observar las tradiciones, los valores y la forma en que se van las comunidades locales, sino también de participar activamente en ellos. Al mismo tiempo, dicho enfoque permite que la comunidad misma se desarrolle y crezca utilizando su propio potencial y recursos. Este tipo de actividades tiende a aumentar el nivel de conciencia, comprensión y respeto hacia los turistas y hacia los residentes.*

*Además, el turismo comunitario abre nuevas oportunidades al crear nuevos lugares de trabajo, formando y garantizando diferentes caminos para el desarrollo local. Impacta la vida de la población local en su diversidad cultural, social, política y económica al atraer inversiones, visitantes y alentar a los residentes a probar nuevas formas de trabajo.*

*En el presente artículo, nuestro objetivo es evaluar el efecto que tuvo la pandemia y el confinamiento de Covid-19 en el turismo comunitario. También se discutirá el apoyo comunitario y la acción social como una de sus formas. Nos basaremos en evidencia de empleados de ese sector. Al hacer dicho análisis, planeamos elaborar un conjunto de sugerencias que ayudarán a restaurar la aplicación del turismo comunitario como herramienta de intervención social.*

## Keywords.

*turismo comunitario, Covid-19, apoyo comunitario, acción social, intervención social*



## Introduction

To slow down and counteract the spread of Covid-19, most countries in the world closed their borders. As a result of these measures and the development of the pandemic in general, many sectors of the economy have suffered drastic drops in their activities.

Tourism turned out to be one of the industries most affected worldwide by the economic consequences of the pandemic. Traditionally, the effect in this area was produced more by changes in traveler preferences and some external shocks. An example of such a clash may be the organization of events in a specific country that redistributes travel to other regions on a large scale. However, the case of industry paralysis caused by the pandemic is different. It is an exogenous and oppressive factor for the global tourism industry just like military conflicts, terrorist threats, climate change, currency fluctuations, financial crises. In other words, the industry cannot control it and that is why its consequences tend to be more drastic.

According to data of the International Labour Organization, in 2019 the tourism industry was directly or indirectly providing around 330 million jobs all over the world (ILO, 2020). This number was equivalent to 10.3% of the total global employment rate, or one in ten jobs in the world. Each job in turn created more income for the local economy, directly or indirectly supporting other sectors and guaranteeing work in subsectors. For example, the hotel and restaurant subsector alone provided employment for 144 million people worldwide (ILO, 2020). Among them, around 44 million were self-employed and 7 million were employed by others. Most of the companies involved in tourism activities were micro, small and medium-sized (MSMES), with less than 50 employees. Approximately 30% of all people in the sector were employed in companies with 2 – 9 workers (UNWTO, 2020). The pandemic had and continues to have a huge impact on companies and the lives of their employees.

In present article we address the sphere of community-based tourism (CBT), taking Uzbekistan as case for analysis. The CBT is frequently seen as part of a strategy dedicated to supporting local communities. Its application as a type of social intervention is remarkable and is present worldwide. Johnson (2010) describes it as a tool that serves for local development through focusing on generation of economic, social and cultural benefits. It tends to secure conditions for creation of third sector

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projects to guarantee the involvement of citizens in decision-making processes and increase social and cultural capital in the long term.

A number of studies (Harris, 2009; Rocharungsat, 2008) argue that community participation and involvement in decision-making improve the resilience of economic, social and ecological systems. Based on this idea, the CBT is promoted as a way to improve people's lives, increase the number of jobs, literacy levels and GDP. In that manner it becomes one of the important instruments of social intervention. It should be noticed that the benefits highlighted do not emerge as quickly as expected. Depending on the country and local conditions many obstacles can impede the CBT progress. Power imbalances between stakeholders, dependency on external funding, support and consultancy, lack of skills, knowledge and expertise can lead to failure of CBT activities. And in the moments of crises, such as the one that emerged in Covid-19 conditions, even the minor problems create the ground for serious negative consequences.

The present research aims to analyze the effects of Covid-19 pandemic in CBT sphere. We base ourselves on the evidence gathered from employees of the sector taking as an example the case of CBT in Uzbekistan, one of the Central Asian countries. The analysis conducted can be helpful for elaboration of policies that will assist in restoration of CBT practices in the country and their usage as a social intervention tool.

## 1. Situation in community-based tourism sector during the Covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic is being viewed as an opportunity for small countries to rethink their tourism activities and perspectives by leveraging local biodiversity

and natural resources to ensure sustainability and diversification in post-Covid-19 tourism (Kampbel, Sigala & Honeck, 2020). Covid-19, on the other hand, increased the financial challenges experienced by many CBT owners whose enterprises were self-funded and strongly reliant on tourists.

It's crucial to note that CBT is a supplementary source of revenue for most cooperatives, meaning that in addition to tourism, members engage in other economic activities typical of their rural settings. However, the unexpected lack of tourists has had a significant impact on their household income.

Government responses, involvement, and support, such as government stimulus packages, are credited as mentioned by Hall, Scott & Gossling (2020), Higgins-Desbiolles (2020), and Sharma, Thomas & Paul (2021), particularly for enterprises operating at lower capacity during the pandemic.

In 2020, we can see that certain governments are providing assistance and support, such as fee waivers for trade and payment, as well as tax breaks on corporate income tax for enterprises in the tourist and hospitality industry. All over the world, economies heavily dependent on tourism sector are working to finance a broad range of policy measures to soften the impact of decreasing tourism revenues. Grants, payroll support, tax relief, cash transfers, and loan guarantees have been applied. Banks have also softened or paused loan repayments in some cases. Some countries have focused support on informal workers, who tend to be concentrated in the tourism sector and are highly vulnerable.

To date, the CBT operations' resiliency can be attributed to their capacity to adapt to the "new" market and the unique scenario imposed by Covid-19. Self-observation and developing self-independence in their enterprises are also used to achieve this. According to Sharma et al., the process of tourism



resilience was primarily based on taking strategic activities while adapting to the new environment during Covid-19.

According to a growing body of evidence, micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMES) are vulnerable to failure during economic downturns (Chin & Hampton, 2020), which has negative consequences for people's quality of life (Yildiz, 2014; Zhang et al, 2018), but constant innovation of roles and practices in entrepreneurial endeavor's may be able to keep MSMES afloat in difficult times (Beck, 2015; Latham, 2009). According to Freeman (2004), successful implementation of creativity and innovation can lead to beneficial outcomes in enterprises, whereas Adam and Alarifi (2021) discovered that role and practice innovation, as well as government support, is critical to ensuring the viability of MSMES during Covid-19. Therefore, Covid-19 has been seen to alter some of these CBT operations' beliefs and practices. Owners have swiftly modified their roles and practices to be resilient in the CBT market inside domestic tourism, initiating creativity that is projected to last even in the post-Covid-19 age. During the pandemic, the government stepped heavily in CBT operations, focusing on reducing charges and giving funds, allowing these business owners to exert authority, be creative, and make judgments that benefited their companies. Some homestay facilities are now serving as service providers and mediators in partnership with travel agencies, while others want to expand their operations to other endeavors considering the growing popularity of domestic tourism, which will ensure their business's long-term viability.

With these changes and along with all the negative impact of Covid-19 there are some opportunities are also opened for CBT. First of all, it is associated with the change of the behavior of tourists. It can be hypothesized that most of the tourists for some period of time will try to avoid crowded destinations

and in most cases the short distance travels will prevail. It can enhance the further development of CBT on the basis of domestic tourism in various countries. Due to high internal similarity of culture and livelihood domestic travel in many countries has not been a main source of provision of customers for CBT. This can become an opportunity for authorities to reconsider the importance of the development of the internal tourism and re-evaluate its capacity. Community-based tourism can offer to domestic tourists deeper exploration of the already well-known destinations.

Another opportunity can be observed in the flow of specialists to local destinations due to decreased chances of finding jobs in large cities. This can indirectly support the development of CBT bringing ideas, innovation and modern technology.

Indeed, tourism industry has a chance to reconsider the strategies to undertake, particularly, in CBT sector. Local communities must diversify the sources of income and not heavily be dependent solely on tourism. Smaller, tourism-dependent nations are in many ways locked into their economic destinies. Among small island nations, there are few, if any, alternative sectors to which they can shift labor and capital. However, even in case of strong dependencies on income from tourism and low level of adaptability it is becoming obvious that local communities must collaborate with other tourism related agents, for example with tour operators. The tour operators have experience in the field, strong business orientation, expert views and marketing experience that they can share with the local communities. On the other hand, tour operators can get a new product to offer. In times of crisis from such collaboration both sectors would benefit and would have chance together develop capacity building programs including designing better itineraries, offering better activities and more creative storytelling.



The strong bonds between the private sector, the government and the local communities may allow local resources be managed in a sustainable way.

## 2. An overview of community-based tourism in Uzbekistan

The CBT is a relatively new form of tourism in Uzbekistan that is gaining popularity. It is based on the interest of visitors in the real life of local communities, in getting acquainted with folk traditions, rituals, creativity and culture. Today, the tour operators of Uzbekistan offer a variety of options that differs from the standard classical historical route and includes the CBT component. The main purpose of such programs is, on the one hand, to provide tourists an authentic experience in interaction with local community. On the other hand, to reinforce society and improve its economic, social, and cultural well-being. The CBT model in Uzbekistan is seen as a development tool that promotes innovative approaches with usage of existing resources to improve the quality of life of residents.

Only over the last decade the CBT practices have rooted in the tourism sphere of the country. It started appearing as a form of eco- and rural tourism with more active involvement of local communities. With support from local and international organizations that form of tourism activities, based on a participatory approach, became a prominent sphere. Community groups became the providers of tourism services, in their majority clustering around various ecological sites. Uzbekistan counts with four main well-established CBT destinations in five regions of the country. All of them have a history of work and contributions from local government, NGOs and international organizations. However, even before the pandemic a certain need for coordination,

pricing, trainings, and general requirements for tourism services in that sphere was observed.

International practice demonstrates the importance of management organizational structures for CBT. It can be separate ministries or a group of them, local administration, commissions, etc. In Uzbekistan the Association of Private Tourism Organizations (AOTP) was founded in 1998 as the initiative of private tour operators and hotels of the republic. The activities of AOTP are focused not only on CBT development, but also on social intervention at the community level in Uzbekistan. Through that channel the consolidation of travel businesses, hotel business stakeholders, and guest houses is done. The association provides support and guidance, when needed, and represents small and medium-sized companies' interests at regional and state level.

The AOTP determines several key points as key objectives of CBT tourism in Uzbekistan. First, it aims to generate income to improve the quality of life in remote regions. Second, it increases the awareness of cultural content and preserves the traditional natural culture, rites and traditions. Third, it perceives tourism as a less harmful alternative to agriculture to minimize the negative impact on natural areas. And fourth, it guarantees local participation in decision-making, canalizing the efforts of local communities and voicing them to regional and state authorities.

The CBT tourism is used by AOTP as one of the instruments of development of the local community. The association participates in calls for project on local and international level and uses the money granted by partners and international organizations for technical and practical support of those who are involved in the sector. The citizens are interested in participation in such projects and is promoting local initiatives obtaining assistance in process management and organization of financial flows.



The government of Uzbekistan is investing in guesthouses creation and development. As a result, the network of guesthouses, thematic itineraries in rural areas and combinations with other types of touristic activities are offered to the visitor. One of the pre-pandemic projects of the AOTP was focused on CBT growth through competence development of people from rural areas. It was implemented in collaboration with State committee for the development of tourism of the Republic of Uzbekistan and USAID project for entrepreneurship and business sphere development. Within the framework of this project, trainings were held for workers in the CBT sphere, concerning not only the technical side of their work, but also other aspects. Issues of intercultural communication were raised, language skills were improved, and problem cases were analyzed. The punctual approach used by the association allows to provide support to the representatives of the CBT sphere who are most in need of help, or to those who can transfer information to other workers in their region thanks to their leading position. This method, based on social contacts and connections, given an opportunity to reach a larger number of participants and increase the level of services provided in a larger area. As a result, more tourists are interested in these destinations and the level of well-being of employees in the field and those dependent on them increases.

However, the effect of such programs in long-term is not evaluated, therefore it is difficult to measure their overall effectiveness (Alieva, Usmonova & Aktamov, 2021). In addition, a very pronounced difference is noted between the points of view of the experts who designate successful community tourism projects and those who supervise the projects that the experts consider successful. Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown negatively affected the sector. In the following part we will discuss this effect more in detail and evaluate the measures taken in Uzbekistan to support and restore the functionality of the CBT sphere.

### 3. Methodology

The data collection was conducted in two stages. The first one was completed before the pandemic (in 2019-2020) through a series of observations trips to CBT hotspots to assess the state of the sector. As a part of these observations the interviews in mountain villages of Ukhum, Hayat, Sentyabsay, Forish and camping sites in various regions were conducted. Such approach allowed to establish a direct contact with CBT stakeholders in the field and obtain an internal perspective on problematic matters. The evidence was collected from 11 families (22 participants in total) through semi-structured interviews, that lasted around an hour each. During these interviews the participants were asked to share their perspectives on CBT, problems, and developments in the field, prospects and plans for the future. The interviews were conducted in Russian and Uzbek and were transcribed afterwards.

The second stage of data collection was performed after the lockdown, in 2021. Out of 22 participants of the first stage 14 persons were interested in share their insights. The unstructured interviews had as a main aim an understanding of situation of CBT sphere after the lockdown and analysis of potential problems.

### 4. Evidence obtained from the interviews

The participants pointed out the importance of CBT as an instrument for social support in both instances of the interviews. The interviews demonstrated lack of common awareness and general understanding of the concept of CBT. On the other hand, the respondents perceived its importance and advantages, but without specifying any contribution on community level. It is observed that the stakeholders are aware of the immediate advantaged of CBT and the possibility



to earn money from it. They were describing the positive effect of connections network, assistance, knowledge transfer and resources redistribution through these relationships. However, the need of giving the rural communities more attention, building infrastructure, and promoting the benefits of CBT among tourists were highlighted. The interviewed stakeholders named among the main problematic areas “lack of accessible resources”, “poverty”, “lack of information on how to develop that business”, “difficult and complicated process for obtaining the license” and “lack of expertise in the field of tourism”.

Residents, on the other hand, noted significant progress in raising awareness of their area through international NGOs, educational institutions, and public affairs for the enormous value they bring to culture and heritage preservation, environmental conservation, and the establishment and maintenance of ecovillages. The Association of Private Tourism Organizations of Uzbekistan plays an essential role in the network of relationships and assistance in the community tourism industry.

At the same time, there is an insufficient use of the social component. Despite the fact that both the association and market participants recognize the importance of tourism as a social tool, more emphasis on official support measures during the pandemic has been at the business level rather than at the social level. The state simplified some procedures, provided tourism enterprises with tax holidays for the period of the pandemic and reduced payments to the budget. In parallel, funds were allocated to support tourist facilities and prices for domestic transportation were reduced to attract the local population to CBT hotspots after termination of lockdown.

However, according to the interviewed stakeholders, the industry turned out to be unprepared

to attract more tourists in times of crisis. Due to downtime, guest houses have lost in the quality of services provided, which, in turn, has reduced their occupancy. As a result, the measures taken by the government provided assistance to a certain part of the population involved in tourism sphere. Most of those who work in the CBT field could not fully benefit from this support.

## Final considerations

Based on our observations and interviews, we can draw the following conclusions. Both representatives of the community-based tourism and official structures working with them recognize the importance of the sphere as a tool for interaction in the field of social support for the population. However, despite the ongoing activities, there are still many unresolved issues that have become more acute with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Public and private structures should pay attention to supporting the industry not only in terms of the technical functionality of the business, but also provide support from the social side. In particular, to increase the recognition of the industry from the citizens involved in them and potential tourists. Enabling collaboration and clustering can also improve business performance and create more jobs. There is also potential for financing the training of industry workers not only in short-term courses, but also in obtaining education in the field of tourism.

It is necessary to pay attention to the specifics of work in the CBT. As practice has shown, a certain part of state support for the tourism industry does not reach or is not applicable in the case of this type of activities. Consequently, employers in the sphere are forced to look for other sources of funding or change the type of activity. As a result, the effectiveness of the CBT as an instrument of



social support is reduced. The focus should be put on synchronization of the efforts of the state and society in this matter in order to obtain more positive results.

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