

The role of the community in the development of tourism in Azerbaijan: the example of Sheki and Zagatala regions

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Abstract: Tourism considered a phenomenon of the 21st century all over the world, has become one of the primary needs of people. People regularly need to move away from their current familiar places in order to adapt to a changing, renewed life. This tendency enables people worldwide to travel from one place to another for different purposes. In such a case, there is a need to prepare certain services in the destinations to welcome, accommodate, and spend their leisure time effectively with those people - i.e., real tourists. The source of these services aimed at meeting the needs of tourists can be different - large, medium, and small entrepreneurs, local population, local government bodies, and others. Each of the mentioned parties is a stakeholder in the development of tourism. In the article, a research study was carried out on how the local population - that is, communities - approach tourism and their roles in tourism. The main objective of the research is to examine the current state of the tourism and hospitality sector in rural communities and suggest possible ways for future development, identify the main problems faced by people in rural guesthouses, and propose solutions to the problems in order to provide quality service to tourists visiting the region.

The research was conducted with 21 local community representatives who live in the Sheki and Zagatala regions and provide various services to tourists. Sheki is a developed area in terms of tourist reception. Zagatala is a destination in the north-western part of Azerbaijan that is rich in natural beauty. The article comparatively analyzes the attitude of the local population towards tourism in two destinations, where the number of tourists varies depending on their distance from the capital.

The results were analyzed, the approach of the local population to tourism and expectations from tourism in both regions were evaluated, and the role of the community in the development of tourism and its prospects were determined.

Keywords: tourism, community-based tourism, tourism in Azerbaijan, community success, development of tourism

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Statistical and thematic analyses further emphasize that institutional and infrastructural support—not formal education alone—are key determinants of successful community-based tourism (CBT). This aligns with global research advocating for an empowerment-based model of development (Scheyvens, 1999; Hall & Page, 2014).

To ensure CBT thrives in Azerbaijan, it must be embedded within broader development strategies that combine education, institutional coordination, and participatory governance. These findings support national objectives outlined in “Azerbaijan 2030: National Priorities for Socio-Economic Development” and the Strategic Road Map for tourism development.

Recommendations:

1. Expand state and NGO involvement through regular field visits, tailored programs, and participatory decision-making.
2. Enhance access to microfinance and training, especially for women and youth involved in rural tourism.
3. Invest in digital and physical infrastructure, including online promotion, road networks, and signage.
4. Encourage inter-community collaboration through local tourism clusters or cooperative models.
5. Support ongoing training in digital tools, sustainability, language skills, and customer care to improve competitiveness.

These strategies can empower communities to build resilient, inclusive, and sustainable tourism systems aligned with regional development goals.

By following these recommendations, Azerbaijan can ensure that tourism not only drives economic diversification but also promotes social cohesion and long-term community well-being in its rural regions.

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