

ETHICAL, SUSTAINABLE, RESPONSIBLE. WHAT IT MEANS TO “DO THE RIGHT THING” IN CAMBODIA’S TOURISM INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

There has been growing concern in the sustainable tourism literature that travel organisations and travellers can perpetuate global inequalities and extend neo-colonialist structures, especially in the Global-South. A key question that remains unanswered is: *how ethical alternative forms of travel can best get done in practice?*, particularly given global inequalities, neo-colonialism and post-crisis. We attempt to address this question by taking the case of Cambodia, where various community organisations and groups have started delivering and supporting ethical alternative forms of tourism in retaliation to the country’s unsustainable tourism expansion. These organisations use the terms ethical, sustainable or responsible to define their business model to “do the right thing”.

Keywords: *Cambodia, collectives, ethical travel, sustainability, Global South*

Introduction

In the decade prior to the Covid-19 outbreak and subsequent halt to tourism in early 2020, Cambodian tourism was rapidly increasing. However, the majority of these tourists (58%) only visited one region– Siem Reap – the gateway town for the heritage-listed Angkor complex (Asian Development Bank, 2022). This saw the overdevelopment or ‘overtourism’ of the region (and the country more broadly) with large investments from key markets such as China. While a key focus of Siem Reap’s *Provincial Tourism Development Master Plan 2021-2035* is to boost the mass tourism numbers, this conflicts with the national post-Covid tourism recovery roadmap which focuses on resilience and sustainability (Kingdom of Cambodia, 2021). In retaliation to the unsustainable tourism expansion in Siem Reap (and more broadly Cambodia), as well as to an unearthing of the exploitation of children in the tourism industry (Guiney, 2018; Guiney & Mostafanezhad, 2015), several groups and community organisations began to emerge which delivered and supported alternative (sustainable) tourism in the country (Carter et al. 2015).

Our research emerged in reference to the literature on sustainable tourism in the Global South and is a response to concerns that travel organisations and travellers can perpetuate global inequalities and extend neo-colonialist structures in developing countries (Chilufya et al. 2019). This paper reports on an exploratory study of how organisations, which consider themselves to be ethical, define what this practice means and how they perceive their role in a more sustainable industry.

Methods

Community-led organisations in the Global-South have long responded to local needs for sustainability and can provide ethical alternatives to the mainstream mass tourism models. We conducted online, semi-structured interviews with 11 owners/operators of local community-run tourism initiatives that proclaim to be ‘ethical’ in nature. These are members of collectives: *Collective for Good* and/or *Experience Mekong Collection* – both showcase responsible and sustainable travel experiences in Siem Reap and the Greater Mekong Subregion respectively. Most of the interviewees

were expatriates in Cambodia (from Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the USA), however in all of these organisations, expatriates were the minorities. We conducted broad thematic analysis manually and via NVivo. In this paper, we present our consolidated findings on how these organisations self-define their ethical practice.

Preliminary findings

The major themes that have arisen from our analysis of the data were intertwined with the defining of ethical business. For some of the participants the notion of ethics did not fit their conceptualisation of what they did. It became apparent that ‘ethics’ was very much a term used in English speaking regions (eg. Australia or USA as opposed to Cambodia or Europe). However, these organisations were more familiar and accustomed to describing themselves as sustainable or responsible.

Well for me that sounds the same as responsible tourism – like to make that it benefits the local community. Like whatever the tourists do will benefit the locals and yeah for me ethical tourism is the same as responsible tourism. (CFG7, European)

The findings show that a common way to define their way of doing business was by doing the right thing:

When we came here, I realised you actually will make money and be taken care of if you do the right thing. So I think the only way us as an organisation got through COVID was that we had shown people before that we do the right thing. And so, I firmly believe now that we will always be looked after and we'll always be able to look after our staff if we continue to do the right thing. (CFG1, Australian)

The main component of being ethical for these businesses is the contribution they make to the people and community. This was either through appropriate staffing provisions and pay, purchasing from local suppliers, or development that considered the local area.

There were many challenges to being ethical as described by the participants. These were usually financial, however, they also were linked to the awareness and lack of support from various stakeholders.

So sometime, you know, people like, for example, like local people, when they come to [restaurant], when we said about no plastic in our restaurant, they say, “We are like foreigner restaurant. It's not Cambodian restaurant at all.” So they just think like, even the food, we made the Khmer food look very appetising on the day and they say, “Oh, you sell Khmer food. I don't really want to go to your like more often, just one time per month, something like that.” But they not really think it is usual food for them at all. Yeah. It's a bit hard to convince them to come more often. (CFG4, Khmer)

The quote above also illustrates the difference in education levels and business expectations of local Khmer people. They are not accustomed to local products costing much, however this is usually because the products or services provided have traditionally relied on underpayment, evade the tax system or neglect the cost of their disposal.

There are enablers to undertaking business ethically, which are typically the flip side of the identified challenges. Various stakeholders, such as the government and their policies, staff and their commitment, or travellers/customers and their support for local products and services, encourage the organisations to continue their ethical practices. However, more critical is the community of like-minded organisations in Siem Reap which collectively can band together to promote good business and travel.

There is this community in Siem Reap that are very like-minded and the focus is very much there. So with collaborations with others we can make things happen... And now recently with this Collective For Good initiative we're like bringing businesses together, like-minded. Who wants to do something. And then yeah you feel you get support. (CFG7, European)

Conclusion

This study contributes to our understanding of what ethical business practice looks like in Sime Reap, Cambodia. More broadly, it contributes to research which points to the benefits and costs of providing ethical travel in the Global South (Chilufya et al. 2019). A collective of like-minded organisations can facilitate ethical travel such that community and the environment benefit. This can help to address concerns regarding overtourism and justice for local communities (cf. Higgins Desbiolles et al. 2019; Jamal & Higham, 2021).

We have presented preliminary findings in this paper and aim to expand the study. Post-Covid tourism has the potential to reverse unsustainable and inequitably impacts in order to “do the right thing”. However, future research should consider the ethical consumption of so called ‘ethical products and services’ in the Global South (Hughes et al. 2015; McEwen et al. 2015), given the community, and in this study’s case, the travellers still appear to be ignorant of the costs and benefits associated with providing ethical business.

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