

Rural Tourism as a Means of Poverty Alleviation: A Study of Kiulu Farmstay in Sabah

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Abstract

Purpose: The study discovers the role of rural tourism as a means of poverty alleviation in Ulu Kiulu, Tuaran, Sabah through a qualitative study in Kiulu Farmstay.

Design/methodology/approach: A preliminary site visit and key informant interview with the field coordinator of Kiulu Farmstay was conducted to explore the nature of tourism activities in the area and how the activities contribute to the socio-economic development of the local community in the village.

Findings: The results suggest that tourism activities in Kiulu Farmstay have met the rural tourism concept in terms of the activities involved and the impact it has contributed to the local community through job opportunities, community empowerment, and household income.

Research limitations/implications: This study involved a single interview with the key informant in selected rural tourism destination in Sabah, thus the results might not be adequate to make general interpretations for a larger population.

Practical implications: This study lends insights to some solutions on poverty alleviation in rural areas through rural tourism by suggesting to operators and policymakers that it is important to provide the local community with relevant capacity building and to ensure adequate support from other actors in the rural tourism supply chain, like NGOs, universities, volunteers, government, in line with the trickle-down concept of tourism.

Originality/value: This study provides value as it is one of the very few studies which have investigated the economic and distributional impacts of rural tourism to the local community as the main beneficiaries, as well as stakeholders' involvement in the development of tourism in the rural area.

Keywords: Rural tourism, Rural area, Poverty alleviation, Kiulu Farmstay, Stakeholder involvement, Community participation,

Introduction

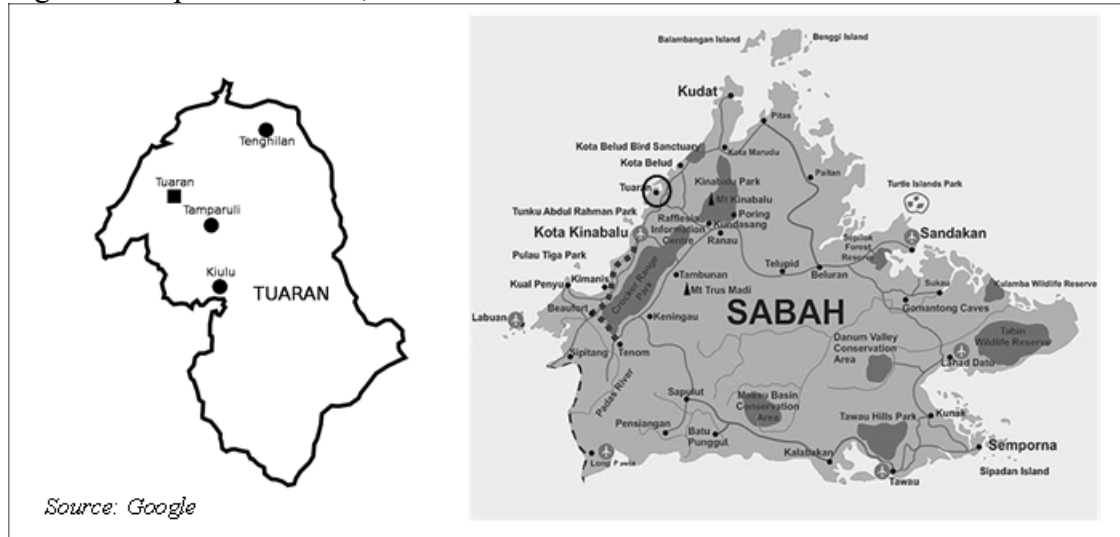
In many developing countries, there is a higher incidence of poverty in the rural area than in urban areas. In Malaysia, for example, the Department of Statistics, Malaysia (2019) reported that some remote areas are still inclined towards poverty, especially in the states with a larger rural population like Sabah, where almost two-thirds of the districts have monthly household gross income below the rural poverty line income. The strategic plan for poverty alleviation in many developing countries has been focused on infrastructure development (Nair & Sagar, 2015), human capital investment (Kelliher, Reini, Johnson & Joppe, 2018) and community-based approach (Oakley & Clegg, 1999). In addition, the significant impact of tourism on the economy of the rural area has been deliberately studied by many scholars as a means of poverty alleviation, measured by household income (e.g., Kim, Xie & Cirella, 2019), quality of life (Adnan & Mamat, 2018), and basic facilities and amenities (e.g., Perumal, et al, 2016; Manu & Kuuder, 2012). Notwithstanding, two challenges have been anticipated by some scholars when linking rural tourism with poverty alleviation – (i) how to develop tourism activities in a rural area with very limited resources and supports and (ii) how to target the poor as the main beneficiaries (Kayat, 2014; Mayan, 2017; Lo, Choy, Mohamad & Chin, 2018). In addition, there is still a lack of detailed study from the local community point of view, in terms of the rural tourism concept in their area, and how tourism activities contribute to local community income for a better living. Therefore, this study aims to understand the nature of the rural tourism concept in Kiulu Farmstay and how the tourism-related activities in the farmstay have contributed to the local community as the source of income.

In Sabah, rural tourism has been receiving greater concern from the government in which the development has been supported by tourism development policy, the increasing market trend for rural and ecotourism, and the potential impact it brings to the economy. Rural tourism has been seen as one of the important income-generating sectors for local community in rural area, and farmstay is one of the rural tourism activities that offer significant source of income to community. Based on the concept of rural tourism, farmstay is a tourism product which involves a combination of various tourism-related activities including accommodation, recreational and cultural. Since farmstay is not a single entity like an ordinary guesthouse or homestay, it has been defined together with rural tourism concept. Rural tourism is defined as a type of tourism destination that is characterised by rural functions (such as traditional, locally-based, remote, authentic, and mainly agricultural areas) where the tourists can physically, socially, or psychologically immerse themselves in this specific destination, with the aims to revitalise local resources for socio-economic sustainability through active local community empowerment and involvement (Rosalina, Dupre & Wang, 2021; Hussin, 2008).

There are more than 70 main rural tourism sites in Sabah, notably the nature-based recreational Kota Belud, rainforest lodge in Kota Kinabalu, the longhouse in Kudat, the highland farmstay in Tambunan, and the wildlife corridor in Kinabatangan (Sabah Tourism Board, 2021). The Ulu Kiulu in Tuaran is one of the rural tourism destinations in Sabah and Kiulu Farmstay is highlighted as one of the top Sabah's rural Tourism by Sabah Tourism Board (2021). Kiulu

Farmstay is located in Ulu Kiulu, a small county in Kiulu area, under Tuaran district (Figure 1). Kiulu is rich with agri-based sector (e.g. rubber, local fruits, paddy and vegetables), local cultures of kampung folks, handicrafts (e.g. *dalai*) and its local delicacies (e.g. *tuhau*, *jantung pisang*, *ubi kayu*) that are being transformed into income-generating activities by the locals through farmstay.

Figure 1. Map of Ulu Kiulu, Tuaran



Literature Review

Rural Tourism and Poverty Alleviation

Rural poverty faces greater restraints than those of the urban poor (Mthembu & Mutambara, 2018; Feng, Wei, Zhang & Gu, 2018; Noble, Ratcliffe & Wright, 2004), in terms of access to shelter, water, sanitation, health, education and social security. Many rural people are still struggling due to decreasing economic activity in their area (e.g., Ayazlar & Ayazlar, 2015; Lane, 2009). Rural poverty is defined as the absence of resources (basic services, skills, employment opportunities) in which the individual is not able to fulfil their basic needs or attain their dreams and desires (Khan, 2000). Poverty alleviation has been regarded as a major priority agenda within developed and developing countries and the government has put much attention and interest in a tourism-based approach as a tool for poverty alleviation.

In Malaysia, the most basic approach towards rural poverty is through ‘pro-active measures’ through infrastructure development, e.g., building more roads, ensure an uninterrupted supply of water and electricity, which represents a substantial government expenditure (Nair & Sagar, 2015). In some countries, focusing on endogenous development strategies rather than exogenous strategies, i.e., to retain maximum benefit to the locality by using and adding value to its local resources and focusing on the requirements and capacities of its people (Kelliher, et. al., 2018) is seen as a promising strategy to combat rural poverty. Most advocates of pro-poor contend that it is crucial to focus on a timely and multi-dimensional approach for poverty alleviation, i.e., back to a basic ‘participatory approach’. This approach adopting bottom-up community participation in the formulation and implementation of policies or programs for poverty eradication (Oakley & Clegg, 1999).

Farmstay – The Development and Benefits to Community

Numerous development models in the literature underlie the concept of rural tourism. Saxena and Ilbery (2007) proposed the concept of embeddedness, endogeneity and empowerment through the construction of networks that enable actors to jointly develop resources such as local traditions, art forms, nature-based, celebration and knowledge. Blake, Arbache, Sinclair and Tales (2008) suggest rural tourism should examine the economic impact in the rural area by looking at relative changes on prices, earnings and government revenue. Feng, et al. (2018) propose rural tourism as a social network that explicitly links different stakeholders from multiple industries, not merely tourism business) together with social, cultural, economic and environmental resources, to offer more income revenues for the poor. In a nutshell, the basic concepts of rural tourism include these aspects –(i) located in rural areas, (ii) built upon rural scenery and human activities (heritage, nature, traditional practices) as key tourist attractions, (iii) rural in scale, i.e., small-scale, growing slowly and organically, involved with local families. (iv) aiming to contribute to the development of rural areas and being sustainable. In conclusion, the concept of rural tourism has been emphasised by scholars in community development in terms of participation, empowerment, partnership, community aspirations and capacity (Scheyvens, 2002; Hussin, 2008).

Farmstay is one of the popular products for rural tourism, which interchangeably called as village stay or homestay in many studies (e.g. Sudarmo, Ahmad, Kasim, Kamaruddin & Bakar, 2020; Gomes, 2017; Hussin, 2008). Many previous studies on rural tourism suggest farmstay or village stay able to provide decent income to local community through combined various tourism activities including accommodation service, outdoor recreation, and cultural and heritage products (Gomes, 2017; Hussin, 2008). Farmstay activities offer a significant source of income for local community, through off-farm employment by creating jobs associated with farmstay and by encouraging small business start-up in the local community. The impact of tourism activities through farmstay project has been long discussed in previous studies, that it able to increase household income of local community (e.g. Zyl & Merwe, 2021; Kunjuraman, 2020; Gomez, 2007; Hussin, 2008; Schulze, 1997), through employment (i.e. directly employed in the tourism site), self-employed as occasional boatman, tour guide, laundry services or meal preparation, opportunity to expand farming operations, and also through new businesses (e.g. homestay/ lodging, sell handicrafts and agricultural products).

In a nutshell, in most countries, rural tourism has been viewed by many policymakers as an alternative development strategy for economies and societies. Despite the popularity of promoting tourism and recreation as an economic development strategy for many rural areas, many questioned the quality of the growth that tourism generates, i.e. the role of tourism as a means to alleviate rural poverty. Therefore, by acknowledging the importance of farmstay as source of income to local community, this study aims to investigate from the life experience of local community on the benefits of Kiulu Farmstay to local economy.

Research Questions

This study intends to address the two anticipated issues found in the literature when linking rural tourism with poverty alleviation, i.e. the resources and supports; and as well as the impact on the community's livelihood. Therefore, it is important to examine the economic and distributional impacts of tourism in the rural area by understanding the nature of rural tourism in the study (the concept of rural tourism destination and the important actors in the network) and the contribution of rural tourism to the socio-economic of the poor.

In view of the foregoing, the researchers formulated the research questions as follows:-

- (i) How Kiulu Farmstay is operated as a rural tourism destination based on rural tourism definition and concept?
- (ii) How do the tourism activities in Kiulu Farmstay contribute to socio-economic benefits to the local community?

The above research questions are answered by the respondent in the study, through a key informant interview with the field coordinator in Kiulu Farmstay.

Methods

This study took place in Kiulu Farmstay, Ulu Kiulu, Tuaran, Sabah. A qualitative approach was employed for this study, in which a structured key informant interview was conducted with the field coordinator in the farmstay, named Mr Saidin Lotupas. He has been joining tourism cooperative initiated by the local community in Ulu Kiulu, called MUKEST (Mukim Ulu Kiulu Ecotourism Solutions and Technologies) in his village since 2015. He is the liaison officer between the community in his village with other NGO or government agencies (Figure 2). The key informant was selected based on his ability to give information relevant to the research questions posed, i.e., background information about the nature of rural tourism in Ulu Kiulu and the impact on the local community. This study is a part of a larger research project of sustainable rural tourism development, that is funded by a research grant from the Universiti Malaysia Sabah. The fieldwork involved a reconnaissance visit to Kiulu Farmstay, to explore the nature of rural tourism in the area, and to understand from the perspective of the local operator about the economic contribution of tourism activities in the farmstay to the local community.

Ulu Kiulu was purposively chosen as it is one of the rural tourism attractions in the rural area of Sabah. Purposive sampling allows convenience and more objectivity rather than excessive information to explain the phenomenon under investigation (Blaikie & Priest, 2017; Bell, Bryman & Harley 2019). A structured interview guide was used to gather information on the income-generating activities in the farmstay and the impact of the activities on the livelihood of the local people in the area. All responses were summarised into a composite diagram and tables befitting the research objectives.

Figure 2. Key Informant Interview



Findings

Kiulu Farmstay, a Rural Tourism Concept

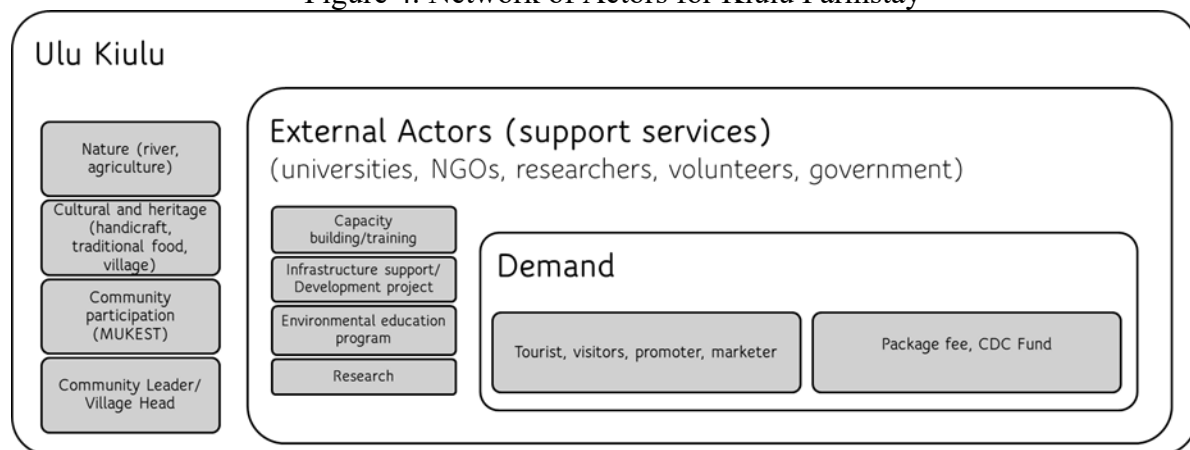
Kiulu Farmstay was first started in 2015, initiated by the local community, the village heads, as well as by locals and international volunteers and several non-government organisations. Kiulu Farmstay is a community-based ecotourism project involving 13 several villages in the area. It is found from the interview that the income-generating activities in the farmstay is run

by the Ulu Kiulu communities under a cooperative called MUKEST Society (Mukim Ulu Kiulu Ecotourism Solutions and Technologies). MUKEST aims to boost economic growth and improve the livelihoods of local people through participation in tourism activities in the area. Kiulu Farmstay offers 3 tourism activities including (i)quad biking, (ii)homestay and (iii)ecotourism activities like fish feeding, buffalo riding, rubber tapping, paddy planting and nature exploration and cultural and heritage activities (Figure 3). Visitors who come and stay at the Kiulu Farmstay will contribute to the Community Development Contributions (CDC) fund that goes to MUKEST Society, which will be responsible for overseeing the CDC fund to benefit all the community in the villages.

From the observation and interview, the researchers noted that Kiulu Farmstay is a rural tourism destination that conforms to the four key aspects of rural tourism as mentioned in the literature (e.g. Rosalina, Dupre & Wang, 2021; Lane, 2009; Saxena & Ilbery, 2007; Sharpley, 2008), i.e. located in the rural area, operated as a small-scale through community participation, built upon rural scenery and human activities and aiming to contribute to the poor. In relating to the contribution of Kiulu Farmstay to community development, it is found that several income-generating activities are trickled down to the local villagers, for example as part-time helpers for housekeeping, cleaning, fish feeding, guiding and maintenance, landscaping and meal preparation. Besides, the respondent mentioned that almost six families are currently involved as homestay operators nearby the farmstay to cater more than 300 tourists to Ulu Kiulu per month. This provides insights that the tourism activity in the farmstay contribute to employment creation and business opportunities especially for the local community, the basic concept when developing rural tourism.

The researchers noted a significant stakeholder involvement in rural tourism at the Kiulu Farmstay and the nearby tourist destinations based on the interview. This is parallel to Islam, 2021; Khaeril, Mohungo & Laela, 2021; Kayat, 2014) who suggested that a multi-industries integration network and community participation in rural tourism is crucial for poverty alleviation. The interview provides insights that the integrated network of actors has contributed to the development of rural tourism in Ulu Kiulu. The actors in Kiulu Farmstay are the community and stakeholders in the rural tourism supply chain including the supply actors (e.g., nature, cultural and heritage, community, and community leader), the support services (e.g., research, infrastructure, and capacity building) and the demand actors (e.g., the tourist/guests). This network of actors in the rural tourism ecosystem can be surmised into a composite framework depicted in Figure 4.

Figure 4. Network of Actors for Kiulu Farmstay



Economic Benefits of Kiulu Farmstay to Community

The economic benefits of tourism activities in Kiulu Farmstay can be referred to the income received by the local community when they participate in the activities like making handicrafts, cook local delicacies for the guests and as a part-time helper at the farmstay. According to the respondent, most of the villagers earn inconsistent income and mainly work as a rubber tappers, construction workers and some of them undertake part-time or odd jobs like get pay for searching for wood and rattan in the jungle or helping friends with food and handicrafts making. The key informant viewed that the downstream business from tourism activities at the Kiulu Farmstay has contributed to new alternative household income to the local community, for examples homestay, the sale of native handcraft and local food, and rental service. Table 1 shows 43 percent of the villagers in Ulu Kiulu have benefited from the income activities in Kiulu Farmstay, mainly through homestay business, full-time workers at Kiulu Farmstay and small business. The interview also provides significant insights to the additional sources of income of Ulu Kiulu community before and after joining the tourism activities at the Kiulu Farmstay (Table 2).

Table 1. Types of Income Activities in Kiulu Farmstay and Number of Villagers

Types of Income Activities	Number of Villagers Who Benefit
Full-time field coordinator	2 villagers
Part time in-house guide/ tour guide	3 villagers
Farming intensification project by NGO (e.g. rice, agricultural, fishing)	5 villagers
Homestay owner	50 villagers (approximately 10 households with an average of 5 family members per house)
Full-time work at Kiulu Farmstay	40 villagers
Downstream business (e.g. handcraft, local food)	30 villagers (approximately 6 households with 5 family members per house).
Total	130 villagers of 300 villagers in Ulu Kiulu. (43% of Ulu Kiulu population)

Table 2. Alternative Income of Ulu Kiulu Community from Tourism Activities

Income from Conventional Job	Income from Tourism Business
Rubber tapper: RM20 per day x 15 days = approximately RM300 to RM400 per month	Field coordinator /maintenance keeper = RM1,000 per month
Production operator/construction worker outside the village = RM800 per month	Work at the farmstay (as a guide, housekeeping/cleaning, fish feeding) = RM 40 x 20 to 25 days = RM800 to RM1,000 per month.
Doing odd jobs (inconsistent income)	Host a homestay (food preparation + cultural activity): RM 115 x 5 pax (per group, per house) = RM 600 to RM 700 per family
No Income / Unemployed	Part-time helpers at the farmstay (Receive wage from rubber tapping/ paddy planting package) = RM 10/tourist x 100 pax per month = RM 1,000 per month Food preparation/catering: RM 50 x 100 pax per month = RM 5,000 per month

Discussion and Conclusion

Theoretical Implications

This study lends insights to some solutions on poverty alleviation in rural areas through rural tourism by suggesting to operators and policymakers that it is important to provide the local community with relevant capacity building and to ensure adequate support from other actors in the rural tourism supply chain, like NGOs, universities, volunteers, government, in line with the trickle-down concept of tourism, i.e., tourism-led growth strategy.

Practical and Social Implications

This study supports the role of rural tourism as the vehicle for economic growth and diversification, and as a plausible force for local economic development and poverty alleviation. The key informant interview provides insights that Kiulu Farmstay has met the basic concept of rural tourism as mentioned in the literature and that the integrated network from the community and other stakeholders is imperative for rural tourism destination development in the Ulu Kiulu. The key informant interview suggested that there is a significant impact exerted by community participation in tourism activities on the poverty alleviation at the area as intended by the cooperative, MUKEST. Local communities who are involved in tourism activities either as full-time homestay operators or as part-time helpers at the farmstay receive additional income and thus improve their household economy. In addition, stakeholders in the form of tourism operators, the local government and supporting institutions, act mainly as the mediator and supporting actors in providing basic infrastructure and human capital, in fact as destinations promoters. The study also suggests that tourism agencies or local government could become the mediator to facilitate the local tourism businesses in the rural area to build their network with each other to enjoy mutual benefits, for tourism and socio-economic development. This study is consistent with the findings that suggested community participation and stakeholder involvement as the vital component of rural tourism when linking to poverty alleviation. The study also supports the integrated network concept mentioned in the literature as enablers to a more organized management of rural tourism project which the focus is to benefit all parties in the network without destroying or threatening the socio-cultural and natural ecological environment (Feng, et al., 2018; Saxena & Ilbery, 2007).

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

In conclusion, this study looks at the role of rural tourism as a means of poverty alleviation, which involved a single interview with the key informant in selected rural tourism destination, thus the results might not be adequate to make general interpretations for a larger population. Notwithstanding, this study lends insights to some solutions on poverty alleviation in rural areas through rural tourism by suggesting to operators and policymakers that it is important to provide the local community with relevant capacity building and to ensure adequate support from other actors in the rural tourism supply chain. Further research which involves gathering perspectives from other actors in the value chain, e.g. local community, local government authority, non-government agencies, tourists, suppliers and tourism operators will be put forward.

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