

One-Village-One-Product: A Countryside Capitalization Approach to Alleviate Rural Poverty in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

This study used a qualitative approach to investigate the potential of implementing the One-Village-One-Product countryside capitalization model in the Ridigama village. In-depth interviews, focus group discussions, and observations of the research team were mainly used in collecting data for the study. Research findings indicated that the village and the villagers are ominously dependent on the Ridi Viharaya, which is the main religious monument in the village. The village is abundant with natural and socio-cultural capital that can be used when implementing the model. Moreover, the willingness of the people in developing the concept and mainly the leadership of Mahanayake Thero of Ridi Viharaya were the main strengths possessed by this village in this regard. These findings led to the articulation of the One-Village-One-Product model considering Spiritual Tourism as the core of it. Finally, the findings of the study strongly recommended implementing the model with five key trust areas, namely; spiritual wellbeing; conservation of ecosystem/biodiversity; conservation of historically build environment; conservation of social-culture; and quality of tourism.

Keywords: One-Village-One-Product, Countryside capitalization, Spiritual tourism, Ridigama, and Ridi Viharaya.



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Background of the Study

Poverty alleviation has occupied a prime slot in the universal agenda over the decades for the mere fact that it is a phenomenon that inhibits the progression of nations across the globe. Hence, emphasizing the gravity of the issue, countries have arrived at a consensus to combat poverty by prioritizing ‘No Poverty’ as the first sustainable development goal (SDG) of the United Nations development agenda. As a demographically and geographically small nation, Sri Lanka continues to feel the tremors of the poverty earthquake, though the effects could be lesser in extent compared to other countries in Asia and other regions. According to an estimation in 2016 by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Sri Lanka’s GDP per capita is US \$2,041, which makes the country the 119th wealthiest in the world out of a total of 180 countries. While its GDP per capita places Sri Lanka well ahead of India (\$1,033) and Pakistan (\$1,017), it still means that the country ranks in the bottom third of all countries — literally the “third world.” The wealthiest country, as estimated by the IMF, is Luxembourg, with a GDP per capita of \$94,418, followed by Norway, Qatar, and Switzerland. Singapore is placed 23rd with a GDP per capita of \$34,346 and the Maldives is placed 93rd (\$3,893). However, GDP per capita does not tell the whole story, because it does not show how wealth is distributed within a country. According to government figures, 15 percent of Sri Lankans live below the official poverty line of Rs. 3,087 a month. The World Bank puts the figure higher, at 23 percent. The UN estimates that 45 percent of Sri Lankans live on less than Rs. 226 (\$2) a day. Poverty is concentrated in rural areas, as well as the North and East, which suffered for decades during the war. Moreover, the country remains stunningly unequal, with the richest 10 percent of the people holding nearly 40 percent of the wealth and the poorest 10 percent holding barely over one percent. Based on the Gini Index of wealth distribution, Sri Lanka is the 27th most unequal country in the world — more unequal than Cambodia (50) Thailand (51), and India (79).

However, poverty has been declining in Sri Lanka, in terms of the proportion of the population who are below the poverty line (defined by the per-capita expenditure for a person to be able to meet the nutritional anchor of 2030 kilocalories). However, there are regional disparities with some districts showing higher levels. Sri Lanka’s poverty by sector shows that poverty in the estate sector is higher than the national average while in terms of absolute numbers the urban sector has the greatest number of poor people due to the higher population density. However, the rural sector is the highest contributor to poverty with over 80% of the poor residing in the rural sector. In each sector, the causes of poverty have different features, such as the enclave structure of the estate sector, the reliance on agriculture in rural areas, lack of services and insecure land tenure, etc. in urban areas. However, some of the common elements that drive poverty are education levels and reliance on low-value employment (i.e. wage labour, agriculture). In terms of employment and household poverty, a coping mechanism for reducing vulnerability is to have a diversified livelihood portfolio with multiple sources of income. Two variables that are critical to the strength of the livelihood portfolio are stability and yield. Therefore, if an income or employment source becomes unstable or if the income earned from it falls, it will have an impact on poverty and the well-being of a household. A best-case scenario would be if a household could develop livelihoods that balance stability with high yield (CEPA, 2009). Tourism can offer alternative income sources that increase the diversity of the livelihood portfolio that can also be a high-yield source of employment. Prior researchers have emphasized the potential of

rural people to create economic activities based on tourism in rural areas as a strategy to alleviate poverty. In particular, the development of tourism villages herein is a customary move, but it is less likely to offer stability due to market fluctuations and inadvertent services that rural people are likely to be engaged in. Thus, recognizing the need for stability in these poverty alleviation models, this study extends the tourism village concept to a one-village-one-product model with a holistic approach.

One-village-one-product model concentrates on the productive power of local potentials, which can be encouraged to grow and develop by utilizing the resources owned by the village so that it can be an effective instrument in encouraging the development of socio-cultural and economic fields of rural communities. Furthermore, efforts will be encouraged to conserve and empower the potential of local culture and local wisdom values that tend to be threatened with extinction due to the heavily globalized currents that have entered rural areas. In the development of the One-village-one-product model, certain guidelines are needed so that the impact of the development of tourism activities in each rural area can be controlled. The guidelines are expected to encourage the development and management of the product to be more focused, planned, and sustainable. Besides, all parties in the area will support the product and in turn, it will provide significant benefits for all villagers.

Literature Review

Development is the highly sought element of human society, whether they are in the rural or urban setting. Recapturing the declining of socio-economies in rural areas is a common challenge (Ying & Zhou, 2007) for both developed (Dernoi, 1991; Hannigan, 1994; Pompl & Lavery, 1993; Williams & Shaw, 1991) and developing countries (Kinsley, 2000). Although contemporary development approaches enable the urban community to improve the quality of life up to extent, it is not realistic in the rural sector. Communities in rural and peripheral areas face challenges for continuous economic development due to decline in primary and traditional industries (McDonal & Jolliffe, 2003), which have led to a vicious circle of economic decline and socio-economic problems (Sharpley, 2002). Collapsing of traditional livelihood and outmigration of the rural community has worsened the situation. Gradually, the rural areas have largely been abandoned and ignored by the populace, even though rural agricultural communities and their residents were once perceived as pioneers or 'bread and butter' of the country (Reichel, Lowengart, & Milman, 2000). Thus, the rural sector contributed immensely to overall socio-economic development in any country. In the Sri Lankan context, many socio empowerment projects have been implemented to uplift the living standards of the rural communities. However, none of these socio empowerment projects was successful or sustainable. Although the communities could find an instant and temporary solution for certain survival problems, these projects were considered as political salvation or social charity. Further, as long as funding is available and benefits are generated, projects display success, and community participation could be recognized, the moment funding stopped; projects have been failed and discontinued. Certainly, lack of independence from top to bottom approach, self-determination, consistency, and regeneration are the major shortfalls of the above projects. Overall, these projects could not identify or establish sustainable capital for socio-economic development, whereas, alternative uses for the local resources would be inevitable to stimulate the rural economies (Liu, 2003) and very

important to create alternative sources of income to retain the economic vitality of the rural areas (Unwin, 1996) rather providing concessionary packages or schemes. Apparently, the rural development has been marginalized or confined due to poor capitalization process, which would incorporate with the assessment of human and physical geography of rural areas, local resource identification and inventorization/ involvement of the local community participation in decision making and development process, and integrated vision for the rural region (Thabrew et al., 2009) are essential actions to reach development goals. Accordingly, the reconceptualization of rural resources as countryside capital (Garrod, Wornell, & Youell, 2006) is an inevitable requirement for rural socio-economic development.

Methodology

The study primarily employs qualitative methodology and follows the case study approach, which allows the use of mixed method techniques for the data collection, such as in-depth interviews and a survey for understanding general community attitudes towards tourism development in their local areas. The interviews were recorded either by using a digital voice recorder or the phone. After carefully listening to the recordings, the voice data were then transferred to the computer and converted into a written document. This process is commonly known as transcribing in qualitative research. Accordingly, all interviews were transcribed. While reading these transcribed documents and sometimes by listening to the recordings, notes were taken from the sections that contain particularly useful information and key quotations for the qualitative analysis. In addition, observations and field visits, and focus group discussions were carried out to identify village resources that can be capitalized in the One-village-one-product model. The case selected for the study was the Ridigama Village in North Central Province.

Observation and Discussion Results

The Religious Monument of the Village: Ridi Viharaya

Ridigama Village is located in the region/province of North-Western. North Western's capital, Kurunegala is approximately 24 km away from Ridigama. The distance from Ridigama to Sri Lanka's capital Colombo is approximately 105 km. The village is famous because of the religious monument, Ridi Viharaya, which is situated atop a hill at Ridigama. It is a cave temple with many interesting legends surrounding it. Accordingly, Amarasekara (2006) mentioned in one of the leading newspapers an interesting story on how this temple came to be known as Ridi Viharaya.

“The king Dutugamunu, one of the Sinhalese kings of ancient Sri Lanka, known for his campaign that defeated and overthrew the usurping Tamil prince Ellalan of Chola Kingdom, reigned from 161 BCE to 137 BCE in the Anuradhapura Kingdom. Upon his victory over Elara, he initiated the construction of Ruwanwelisaya, also known as the "Great Stupa", one of the tallest monuments built before the 20th century. Among other materials, silver was required for the basement of the stupa. In the meantime, some merchants were travelling from the central highlands of Sri Lanka, to the then capital of the country; Anuradhapura. According to the chronicles, they saw

some ripe jackfruit in the Ridigama area; cut it, and thought of offering the first half to Buddhist monks as a ritual. Four Arhat monks appeared according to their wish and accepted the Dana. Then four more monks came and accepted the Dana. The last monk, known as Arhat Indragupta, after partaking the jackfruit, directed the merchants to a path, which led to a cave with a silver ore. They informed the monarch of their finding after arriving in Anuradhapura. The king was much elated upon hearing the news. The ore provided the required amount of silver for the construction work. In gratitude, he built a temple complex on the silver ore, employing 300 masons and 700 others including his chief artisan Vishwakarma Prathiraja”

Later, King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe refurbished the place. It is then that the place had got its Christian touch. Some of the Biblical stories are depicted there, on the tiles of the flower altar and in front of a nine-metre tall Buddha statue. The King had received these tiles as a gift from a European ambassador who had wanted to please the King during the time that the Dutch ruled. The King had in return, gifted them to the temple. These tiles show the creation of man, the fall of man, the great flood and its aftermath, the dove of peace with the olive branch, Moses and the burning bush, the prophets of yore, and some scenes from the New Testament depicting the life of Christ, like the Nativity, the transfiguration and the last supper. Thus, it is now visited by Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians.

Patha Viharaya and Uda Viharaya are the two sections of this cave temple. The Patha Viharaya was built by King Dutugemunu whereas the Uda Viharaya was built by King Kirthi Sri Rajasinghe. The temple holds Kandyan-style wall paintings belonging to the 14th and 18th centuries, an exquisite medieval doorway with intricate carvings inlaid with ivory, a curious pavement inside the main sanctuary, a beautiful moonstone belonging to the pre-8th century period, and a world-famous masterpiece of art carved from ivory. The Patha Viharaya is tucked inside a sizable cave, which is situated under a rock. The original Buddha statue is now kept in a glass case for safety. The doors that lead into this cave are decorated exquisitely in ivory. The center of this wonderful creation is decorated with a design called "Pancha Nari Getaya", the figure of five women entwined in the shape of a knot. The intricate carving depicts from afar, a vase, but on close inspection, it reveals the figure of the five maidens. On either side of this design stand the carvings of two lions. This unique piece of art in ivory has sadly been the subject of vandalism and the remains are now enclosed by a glass box for safety.

Uda Viharaya, which has a Kandyan touch, is decorated with frescoes and paintings and is crowded with images. This is rare in Sinhala art. The main image is a seated Buddha statue. The "Makara Thorana" behind the statue is completed with images of gods and devotees, with an image of the standing Buddha on either side. The "Makara" heads, which form the arch, are turned outwards. Upon the pedestal of the standing Buddha image at the bottom are some unique animal paintings usually not found in temples. The "Three Singha Rupaya" is found on the front of the pedestal, depicts three seated lions; they share one face. There are also paintings of "Sarpenda" and "Vrushaba Kunjaraya". At the end of the cave, outside the shrine room, there is a painting of "Navanari Kunjaraya", which figures of nine maidens arranged in such a way, to

create the image of an elephant. The last chamber of this cave house consists of some old wooden Buddha images and some colorful paintings that give a fabric-like effect.

At the entrance to this cave is the Hindu devalaya, which is dedicated to the guardian of the mountain on which the Ridi Viharaya is situated. Behind the cave, in another open cave is the dagoba. Just outside the temple courtyard is the stone pillared complex. This is known as the "Waraka welandu lena". There is a belief that this place connects with Arhat Indragupta who is said to have partaken of a meal of ripe jak fruit at this spot. There are some stone pillars in this place with carvings of human figures. A dancing girl and a soldier are more visible. There is also a belief that there was a Hindu temple in this place. Outside the temple complex, atop a small rocky hill with an ancient inscription, an abandoned dagoba is situated known as "Sarasum gala chetiya". Here all the visitors who look over the valleys and the hills are entertained with a magnificent vision of beauty.

Countryside Capitalization of Ridigama: Natural Capital

Ridigama is full of many beautiful and fascinating natural resources. Caves, mountains, and streams available in the area have the potential in adding a greater value to the One-village-one-product model proposed to the Ridigama village. Cave tourism, which is known as spelunking in the United States and Canada, and potholing in the United Kingdom would be an identical tourism promotion option for the model as the area holds so many natural caves around. Caves are natural resources that are valued to tourists because of their inherent natural features. This form of tourism attraction is being developed around the world primarily as a tool for the development of local and regional community's income generation. Tourists are motivated to visit caves for adventures, education/research, socialization, recreation, and scientific purposes in general. However, in this proposed model, caves are expected to capitalize in generating a spiritual tourism experience. Spiritual tourism is the central focus in this tourism model as the village has a close association with the Ridi Viharaya. Spiritual tourism would be an important component of the Sri Lankan tourism industry as Sri Lanka is a land of spirituality end owned by many places of worship, pilgrim centres, religious monuments, etc. Buddhist meditation system and techniques, Buddhist education, and Buddhist culture are more vital parts of this spiritual tourism model with the help of well-skilled and knowledge of Buddhist monks in Ridi Viharaya.

Travel to mountain ecosystems is increasing at a rapid pace, as growing numbers of tourists are attracted to the clean air, unique landscapes and wildlife, scenic beauty, culture, history, and recreational opportunities that mountain destinations offer. Mountains, which make up nearly a quarter of all land area in the village, contain a wide variety of habitats, many of which have extremely high levels of unique and rich biodiversity. Therefore, rigorous planning and implementation of tours and tourist activities are needed as they can have a serious impact on these often-fragile ecosystems, as well as on the communities that inhabit. Clean water contributes to the recreation and tourism industry worldwide by accentuating beautiful beaches, white-water rivers, mountain lakes, and aquatic ecosystems such as coral reefs. Water has a powerful attraction for people. When people decide to plan vacations and travel for recreation, instruction, and pleasure, many have a strong tendency to head to the water. Worldwide, tourism annually generates trillions of dollars, a significant percentage of which involves water-related

tourism. Popular water-related tourism activities that can be considered within the area may involve cruise ships, ecotourism, sport fishing, underwater diving, canoeing, and kayaking. The prevailing biodiversity, unsoiled ecosystem, and fauna and flora are the prevalent natural capital seen in the area, which can be carefully used in this countryside capitalization process. Biodiversity describes the variety of life and is the living component of natural capital stocks. It plays an important role in the provision of the services we receive from nature. Once considered a separate issue to climate change, biodiversity loss is now regarded as an equally urgent crisis and its connection to climate adaptation and mitigation is increasingly understood. Biodiversity builds resilience against climate change, supports communities and livelihoods, and fundamentally underpins human wellbeing and the global economy. Businesses are beginning to recognize this and are looking for ways to understand the value of their impacts and dependencies on biodiversity. Viewing natural resources like biodiversity, unsoiled ecosystem, and fauna and flora through a natural capital lens can help businesses to recognize previously unseen values that underpin their resilience and success, providing a clear business case for protection of and investment in the health of natural resources. A capital lens also enables an integrated approach to environmental issue management that recognizes the links and synergies between issues such as climate, water, sustainable development, equity, and biodiversity. Proper guidance needs to be developed as a stepwise approach to incorporate them into the natural resource capitalization process of this One-village-one-product approach. It will guide the people through the process of valuing natural resources in their natural capital assessments and how to operationalize this information in internal decision-making.

Socio-Cultural Capital

Community-based tourism enables the tourist to discover local habitats and wildlife and celebrates and respects traditional cultures, rituals, and wisdom. The community will be aware of the commercial and social value placed on their natural and cultural heritage through tourism, and this will foster community-based conservation of these resources. Therefore, socio-cultural capital elements are inevitable in the development process of any community-based tourism project. Community values, anthropologic resources, aesthetic values, traditional livelihood, and agriculture, dine and cuisine, tangible and intangible heritage, culture and lifestyle, and community amusements are the socio-cultural resources that Ridigama community possess in a great deal. Therefore, embedding a community-based tourism component to the proposed One-village-one-product model is truly possible. However, communities that are involved in community-based tourism need to be strong, resilient, and extremely willing to show tourists their culture. They should be able to manage both the impacts and benefits of tourism, strengthening their self-governance, economic alternatives, and traditional ways of life in the process. According to the discussions that the research team had with the local community, it is very vibrant that they want to invite tourists to their homes. Villagers are more than happy to share their culture and lifestyle, spend time teaching tourists how to cook local dishes, associate tourist guests in their agriculture and local sports. Nevertheless, they need to be trained in this regard.

Conclusion

This study examined the potential of implementing a One-village-one-product model, which takes a countryside capitalization approach, in the Ridigama Village as a strategy to

alleviate rural poverty. The qualitative research approach implemented in this regard confirms the likelihood of introducing a spiritual tourism concept as the core of this One-village-one-product model. Herein, five key trust areas were identified: spiritual wellbeing; conservation of ecosystem/biodiversity; conservation of historically build environment; conservation of social-culture; and quality of tourism. Spiritual wellbeing. These five key trust areas would be the core of the model as the village is significantly associated with the Ridi Viharaya. When promoting the core function, Buddhist meditation & Yoga, Buddhist education, Buddhist culture, and interreligious exploration can be considered as potentials, which have not been used rigorously when promoting tourism in Sri Lanka. The beauty of the ecosystems and the rich biodiversity in the area can also play a major role in this regard. Fauna and flora, diurnal ecosystems, and nocturnal ecosystems in the village would help a great deal here. The third trust area ponders on the historically build environment of the area. Artifacts and monuments, caves, and historical sustainable values and technologies that can be seen in the area would input for the successful implementation of the third trust area. Prevailing social-cultural characteristics such as cultural diversity, preservation of culture, anthropologic and aesthetic values, night heritage, and cuisine, and dine and healing practices of the village do have the potential in strengthening the fourth trust area; social-culture. Finally, the willingness of the people in developing the concept and mainly the strong intervention and leadership of the Mahanayake Thero at Ridi Viharaya would help in providing a quality tourism experience for the visitors.

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