

Tourism in Conflict-Affected Communities of Basilan Province: Prospects, Challenges and Policy Options

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Abstract: *This study aims to determine the prospect of tourism industry in conflict-affected communities of Basilan Province despite of its long drawn image of conflict, violence and poverty. For this purpose, key-informant interviews and textual analysis of available references were conducted. Consequent interviews revealed that Basilan specifically the identified conflicted communities are naturally attractive which drive in tourists despite of its perilous image. This study strongly agrees that peace is not necessarily a requirement for attaining tourism development. Basilan if active policy actions will be undertaken has a strong potential to be as globally competitive as other tourist destinations in the country and worldwide. Local Government Units (LGUs) in coordination with other stakeholders should communally cultivate strategic mechanisms to deracinate its deep-rooted image of war, terrorism and impoverishment and replant a better community hovering with future tourism industries.*

Keywords: tourism, conflict, peace and order, development

1. Introduction

The Philippines is given with inherent beauty and is gifted with such ideal cultural attributes, picturesque beaches and warm hospitalities. Still, development challenges facing Mindanao over the years have to do largely with addressing poverty and conflicts. The conflict-affected areas in Mindanao are the poorest among the 77 provinces of the Philippines. These are also the poorest provinces in Mindanao. With the exception of North Cotabato and Davao del Norte, the incidence of people falling below the poverty line and depth of poverty in these provinces rose dramatically from 1997 to the year 2000. The fall in average incomes of both the poor and non-poor populations was severe in Basilan and Tawi-Tawi. Sustainable development is anchored not only on providing quality and comfort lives but also in aligning the equal importance of profit (economic) and the human/natural capital (environmental and social). This lead to another sub-concept of sustainable development-sustainable tourism. Tourism encapsulates expressions of the world around us, expressions of identity and the marketing of diversity. However, the challenge facing contemporary societies nowadays rests on the integration of sustainability within sustainable tourism policy settings. Tourism for years has encountered critical challenges which covered its emerging potential across nations. One of the perceived factors for hindering sustainable tourism is conflict/violence. Behind violence are entrenched beliefs and cultural systems which brought actions of terrorism and extremism into surface. Conflict in the Autonomous Region of Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) is multi-faceted. It ranges from traditional forms of conflict between armed rebel groups and government forces to inter-communal tensions and clan warfare. As a result of conflict in the ARMM, more than 120,000 people have been killed and many more have been displaced.¹ Basilan as a province

with natural attractors and splendid physical dimensions was overstepped by its imagery of conflicts and feuds. The challenge now lays on transforming the once declined communities to emerging tourism hubs posing scenic beauties which allure the inner drives of tourists. This transpires the essential role of effective Tourism Management in bringing out the potential of Basilan as a tourist destination. Tourism Management is planning, organizing and controlling of tourism products and services to achieve some purpose or goal².

2. Literature Review

Basilan like other behind countries was flawed by its negative image of conflict and war. The presence of terrorist groups has made it even harder for Basilan to raise tourist visits especially on the conflict-affected communities. Terrorism has been recognized as an imminent threat to the tourism industry.³ Even how stunning a place would be, if its peace and order state doesn't warrant a secured visit, tourists may think twice on accepting tourist packages on this destination. It may appear perilous to visit a place where you cannot even assure your safety as a tourist. This is the common clamor of those who were not able to personally visit the Province, as its negative image has already been entrenched into its roots for years. In some way, this was apparently rooted from the overdue publications by mass media. David Altheide (2009) said that the obsession of mass media in terrorism has built a culture of terror among societies.⁴ This misrepresentation has been running for decades now. Bangladesh, a South Asian country has also experienced the same misrepresentation. It was publicized

² McLeod, 2008

³ Maximiliano E. Korstanje, Terrorism, Tourism and the End of Hospitality in the West (University of Palermo, Argentina, 2018)

⁴ Maximiliano E. Korstanje, Terrorism, Tourism and the End of Hospitality in the West (University of Palermo, Argentina, 2018)

¹ Heydarian, 2015, p.4, quoted in Conflict analysis of Muslim Mindanao (Anna Louise Strachan, 2015), 5.

with calamities and epidemics which drew its adverse image in terms of tourism development. The government accordingly has no strategic planning and concrete actions to better address issues on the ground. Hence in response to this concern, the government established the National Tourism Council to look into the tourism sector of Bangladesh and formulate relevant foreign tourism policies to attract more international investments on readymade garments, leather goods, natural gas and policies on joint ventures.⁵ In the case of the Philippines, the Department of Tourism (DOT) is the responsible agency for regulating and stimulating the Philippines' tourism industry. The Philippine government has undertaken various tourism policies such as the enforcement of Republic Act No. 9593 or an Act Declaring a National Policy for Tourism as an Engine of Investment, Employment, Growth and National Development, and Strengthening the Department of Tourism and its attached Agencies to Effectively Efficiently Implement that Policy, and Appropriating Funds Therefor. The Philippine National Tourism Plan (NTDP) also provides a strategic framework and outlines action plans to guide the Department of Tourism (DOT) and other stakeholders in the development of the tourism sector. Every municipality also has its own local tourism council to implement programs necessary for the development of local tourism attractions, regulation of tourism-oriented institutions and reassuring the safety and sensible visit of tourists in the destination.

As tourism continues to be a dominant global activity for economic gain and employment, there is a need to understand how the business of tourism affects island environments. Tourism activities occur on islands as the resources within islands are natural attractors to tourist markets based on climatic, geographic and cultural features. The cultural diversity is also an attractor to island environments. Islands are natural tourism hubs as their scenic beauty allures the fantasy-driven motives of tourists, who yearn for a rebirth of existence from mundane and banal lives, through tourist experiences.⁶ The Island Province of Basilan as a natural tourism hub runoffs with natural attractors ranging from pristine and white beaches to warm and hospitable people.

3. Problem Definition

Basilan for decades has been tagged as an island of terrorists and extremists. People consider the Province as a place where citizens do not have the chance to taste normal lives. A place where children and youths have no formal education, where women are exploited at their feet, where poverty is at its peak, where rebel and extremist groups dominate the community and where kidnappings and family feuds are widespread. These have marked Basilan as a place that is not safe for tourists/foreign visitors to stay. Despite of its overflowing tourism buds, people are hesitant to visit the

⁵ Syed Anwarul Kabir, et al., Report on the Possibilities of Tourism in Bangladesh, 2009

⁶ Tourism Management in Warm-Water Island Destinations, eds. Michelle McLeod, Robertico Croes (CAB International 2018), 1.

place. They have been overtaken by fear before they even had the chance to discover its beauty within. Hence, this study was conducted to determine the possibility of tourism industry in the identified conflict-driven communities. And if found feasible, what are the policies, programs and initiatives undertaken by the Local Government Unit (LGU) in stimulating the industry.

4. Methodology/Approach

This study has used the key-informant interview to gather the necessary information for the study. The Provincial Tourism Officer and the Police Investigators of the Basilan Provincial Police Office (BPPO), ARMM have been taken as respondents. Open-ended interview questionnaire was used to collect information from the participants. The researcher has also used available references and relevant published works as secondary data. The collected data from the interview conducted were analyzed and presented in textual, graphical and tabular forms.

5. Results and Discussion

Basilan for years has seemingly been cornered from the aisle of sustainable development. It was blitzed with negative publications which eventually divested its right to be recognized as an independent growing province. Tourism as one of the key economic drives of the country strives to surface above the circle of human development notwithstanding the issues and challenges faced in the ground. In accordance with the crime statistics obtained from the key-informant interview (2014 to early 2018)⁷ as shown in Figure 1 below, the municipalities determined to be the top four (4) with the highest crime volume include Maluso, Lamitan City, Lantawan and Sumisip municipalities. This statistics was based on crimes officially reported from 2014 to early 2018.

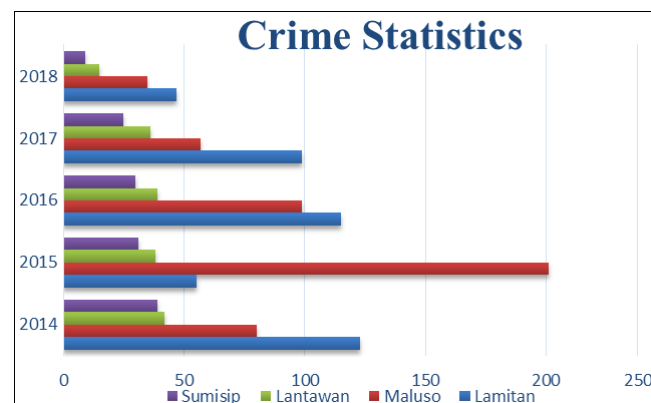


Figure 1: Crime Statistics

After having determined the most conflict-affected communities of the province, this study in essence has identified the potential aspects of these localities in terms of tourism. The Provincial Tourism Office of Basilan through a personal interview has acknowledged the budding tourism facets as well as the weaknesses of these municipalities as shown in Table 1 below.

⁷ Crime Statistics 2014-2018

Table 1: Strengths and Weaknesses

| Municipality | Potential Strengths | Potential Weaknesses |
|--------------|--|--|
| Maluso | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has island beaches which are naturally attractive like the Langgas Island, Garlayan Falls, etc. • Offers native tausug foodsc e.g. tyula itum • Tepo (mat) weaving • Offers package day tour which includes food, transportation and security | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No established hotels, hostel for tourist accommodation • Peace and Order |
| Lamitan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Serves as the center of the weaving industry of yakan cloth in the region • Has many pristine beaches like the Kalugusan beach and Bulingan falls which are visited by tourists from Zamboanga City, Manila City, etc. • Has comfy hostel, hotels and resorts to accommodate tourists • Has various restaurants which offer delightful native nutriments • Accessible for tourists to visit (land and sea trips available) – It has direct sea route from Zamboanga City to Lamitan City; buses and vans offer trips from Isabela City to Lamitan City | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peace and Order |
| Lantawan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducts annual horse-back riding contest to attract visitors • Has pristine beaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No established hostels, hotel or accommodation for tourists • Not accessible to tourist unless with direct coordination with the local government • Not yet open to public • Does not offer tour packages • No tourist spots endorsed to the Provincial Tourism Office |
| Sumisip | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conducts annual Festival (Kalasig-lasigan) to attract visitors and tourists • Has pristine beaches like the Tenuse beach | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not accessible to tourist unless with direct coordination with the local government • Not yet open to public • Takes long travel time to reach the island |

Maluso with highest crime rate is still on the phase of stepping out on the circle of development. Just last year, as the newly-elected municipal mayor sat to position, so as the progress of the locality in terms of stimulating tourism drives. Maluso gives pride to its popular beaches like the Langgas Island and the Garlayan Falls which were made accessible to the visiting tourists through travel packages covering transportation and food. It has its frontline delicacies and nutriments to warm tourists on their travel experiences. However, it has no well-established accomodation sites like hotels and resorts which make it difficult to offer night-long tour packages. As to its accessibility, the most common mode of transportation used are the land vehicles e.g. van and bus.

Lamitan City on the other hand is considered as one of the richest Local Government Units (LGUs) in Basilan in terms of gross income. Tourism comprises one of the major contributors to its generated revenue. Natives engage in yakan cloth weaving, which are exported to different cities in the region. It is renowned as the center of yakan cloth weaving in Basilan. This yakan cloth is in demand not just in Basilan but in all other parts of ARMM and Region IX. Accessible transportation was also made possible through land trips (buses, van) and sea trips (sea vessels). It has its own sea port where direct trips from Zamboanga City to Lamitan City and vice versa are offered on specific time schedules everyday. Scenic beaches and scrumptious native foods have brought colors and sunlit at the forefront of its shorelines like the Kalugusan beach and the Bulingan falls. It also has standard hotels, resorts and hostels to accomodate tourists from their long trips and strenous travels. Native restaurants which offer delectable culturally-inspired cuisines shall bring back lost energies and elation.

Lantawan municipality, unlike Maluso and Lamitan City has not yet fully developed its tourism sector. Though it has potential beaches and sites, however, there were no programs/projects to back these up. It is not yet officially open for public tours, even so, interested visitors are still open to visit the municipality through direct coordination with the LGU. Lantawan also has no established hotels, resorts and restaurants to accomodate tourists and visitors alike. However, this municipality sponsors annual horse-back riding contest as part of the Pakaradjaan of Basilan which pulls in hundreds of visitors from different municipalities and cities in ARMM.

And lastly, Sumisip municipality like Lantawan has not yet been fully developed in terms of tourism. It is popualrly known for its annual Kalasig-lasigan Festival which involves various activities and events which is attented not only by Basileños but as well as by visitors in the region. Its Tenuse beach is popularly known for its white sand and picturesque views. Like Maluso, Sumisip has no accomodation sites to cater tourists and visitors from outside the municipality. Interested tourists are likewise advised to coordinate with the LGU before heading on.

Local policies on Tourism Development – Basilan Province

In a personal interview with the Provincial Tourism Officer of Basilan, it was known that there were no official programs and mechanisms to promote tourism sector in the Province. Apparently, the dependence with the Provincial Governor's office was cited as a factor. The current role undertaken by the PTO is only on bridging tourists to concerned municipalities (destination). Social media like Facebook and Instagram were taken as one of the modes to promote the Province's industry to the outside world.

As to the issues and challenges faced by the PTO in stimulating tourism in the Province, the following were cited: 1. Fake/Over publications, 2. Accessibility, 3. Peace and Order and 4. Accommodation sites. Fake/Over publications have shunned and even discounted the marked potentials of the Province in terms of tourism. The accessibility of these municipalities was also a factor for lower tourist rates for the past years. And the one which made the current image of Basilan as it is now- is its peace and order.

Nevertheless, the peace and order situation of Basilan has been better addressed now compared to that of the past years. The insufficient or absence of a well-established accommodation site like hotel in some way affects the shorter stays of tourists in the island.

The Provincial Tourism Office of Basilan is assigned to undertake and monitor the activities and events of the Province thereby attracting more tourists and visitors. However, in a personal interview with the Provincial Tourism Officer, the PTO has been found to have no official programs and projects for upholding the tourism sector especially the conflicted communities. The apparent factor contingent to this concern is the dependence of the office with the Provincial Governor's office which according to her has emerged as a factor for not having plans, programs and projects. Their office has no sovereign power to initiate and implement relative programs and policies relative to tourism campaign.

The Provincial Tourism Office of Basilan though under the direct supervision of the Governor has delegated powers and authority to come up with relative programs and projects. The PTO in actuality has no active mechanisms to promote the potentials of Basilan which in effect has led for Basilan to be secluded from the global market. The PTO lacks strategic plans to make the most out of the natural beauty of the Province. Although they made use of social media in promoting tourism, still this isn't sufficient to attract and encourage people to visit the province especially the identified conflict-affected communities. It takes a resilient and dynamic strategy to redress this image entrenched within its roots for years now. Nonetheless, though peace and order is still a living shadow of tourism and development in the province, the Provincial Government has undertaken ways to address this concern for the time being. There must be a rounded approach to attain the long-term goal of sustainable human development. In present time, unlike in the past, people are free to visit the province with the exception of those areas which extremely require close coordination with the LGU concerned. As argued by Maximiliano E. Korstanje in his book *Terrorism, Tourism and the End of Hospitality* in

the West, terrorism should be taken as an instrument of building peace and reinforcing democracy instead of a block factor. Henceforth, taking this as a foundation for argument, the Provincial Government should come up with active action plans to channel the tourist destinations to the global society, in so doing can attract diverse tourists to increase investments contributory to its Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Another apparent factor which has emerged into the picture of sustainable tourism is the overstated and false publications. These negative publications directly underwrite the opportunity of Basilan to be known not on its adversative façade, but on its natural attractors and majesty. Undeniably, social media nowadays is at the core of every society. Facebook and Instagram are but some of these social media which form part of our everyday living. First-hand news sometimes appear on the social media before they do in the national television and journals. Indeed, technology has already overtaken humanity. In the context of tourism, in consideration of its impact and power towards humankind, social media can be feasibly used as an effective tool in promoting the intrinsic potential of Basilan in terms of tourist spots/destinations, native products and services. The PTO consequently is on the process of developing a website page where these potential aspects can be featured for public view, hence delivering the beauty of the province at the forefront of every society. As social media can be a double-bladed weapon, let us make the most out of its developing edge instead of the damaging side.

This is how the world sees Basilan in general. A community of fear, terror and a nightmare for most. These are what impede people from visiting the Province, as they conceal its beauty with fright and angst.





However, these are what people are unaware of Basilan. Basilan not as community of incessant war and conflict but a place of emerging harmony and development.





6. Conclusion and Recommendation

The findings of the study explicitly have shown the gap between the Local Government and the tourism industry. The Provincial Government has not maximized their actions and has given less priority and importance to the sector. What underlie this concern are the intervening factors like less authority to implement polices/programs and the persistent negative publication about the Province. The LGU should develop response mechanisms to push tourism out of its isolation and amalgamate with the global society. However, it is imperative to note that any development if not sustained would be of waste. Hence, it is but equally essential to stimulate tourism while preserving and

preventing the natural resources from depletion and devastation. .

This study has likewise shown the potential tourism industry of Basilan through its tourist destinations (beaches, cultural sites), native cuisines and festivities. These prospects are even comparable with other known tourist destinations in the Philippines. The conflicted localities have such magnificent and scenic views which make foreign visitors come despite the Province's adverse image in the contemporary society. Based from the conducted interview with the Provincial Tourism Office (PTO), the local destinations in actuality receive tourists from among neighboring regions in the country. This supports the argument of Sonmez (1998), Butler and Suntikul (2013) that peace is not a requirement for attaining sustainable tourism. Further, this study revealed that the tourism industry in the Province exists. However, there is no effective tourism planning and policy mechanism to better promote and conserve these potentials of Basilan. Therefore, as a general supposition, this study hereby concludes that Basilan Province specifically the conflicted communities have the possibility of achieving sustainable tourism despite its image of conflict, provided strategic tourism planning and responsive policy actions shall be undertaken.

In this regards, this study strongly recommends the synchronization of the Provincial Tourism Office and the municipal local tourism offices in Basilan specifically on the conflicted municipalities like Maluso, Lamitan, Lantawan and Sumisip. Further, the Provincial Tourism Office should closely monitor and supervise the operations of the municipal tourism offices and take the lead in formulating relevant tourism policies. There must be active tourism management planning as a collaborative effort among cities/municipalities of the Province.

7. Future Scope

The salient findings of this study marked the possibility of tourism industry in the conflicted communities of Basilan. It featured the strong points as well as the weaknesses of the industry in terms of stimulating sustainable tourism owing largely to its natural attractors which range from pristine beaches to mouth-watering native foods. However, this study has also pointed some administrative gaps on the part of the Local Government Units (LGUs) concerned. The Provincial Tourism Office (PTO) has seemingly failed to strategize programs and policies to effectually promote the tourism potentials of these localities. For future studies, other indicators for determining the nature and extent of conflict must be considered and discussed in-depth to set a holistic approach on how to effectively manage these conflicts within the realm of tourism industry.

References

- [1] Heydarian, 2015, p.4, quoted in Conflict analysis of Muslim Mindanao (Anna Louise Strachan, 2015),5.
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