

# STAKEHOLDERS' PERCEPTIONS TO THE TOURISM SOCIO-CULTURAL IMPACTS THE CASE OF AQABA IN JORDAN

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## ABSTRACT

It is argued that socio-cultural deterioration is a result from unplanned tourism development. Hence, considering the social carrying capacity in planning is indispensable towards a successful tourism development. The present study is an attempt to identify stakeholders' perceptions to the socio-cultural impacts of tourism in Aqaba, Jordan, within the great acceleration of tourism development occurring in the city. Based on a theoretical approach, the study uses the social exchange theory to measure respondents' perceptions. Furthermore, the study attempts to recognize the respondents' future expectations for the tourism development in the city with its socio-cultural impacts. For this purpose, twenty seven stakeholders in tourism were interviewed. The study findings imply that most respondents see a successful current and future tourism development in Aqaba, the unwillingness of the local community to be involved in the tourism sector, the importance of involving the community in tourism by benefiting them economically, and limited changes in the native culture. The study concluded a modest effort from the city tourism planners to support local residents in Aqaba by benefiting them economically from tourism. Another conclusion is planners' lack of awareness of the potential negative socio-cultural impacts in the future. Finally, the study recommends the local authority to benefit the community in small tourist economic projects and to consider the social carrying capacity when planning.

**Keywords**—Stakeholders, perceptions, socio-cultural impacts, social exchange theory.

## INTRODUCTION

Tourism nowadays represents an important socio-economic base by improving the quality of life, developing the infrastructure and superstructure, appreciating the local architecture, increasing the employment opportunities, improving cultural arts, creating new leisure facilities, and better tolerance of social differences studies (Aref & Redzuan, 2009; Bhattacharjee, 2008; Acharya, 2003; Getz, 1993; Spanou, 2007). The great potential impacts on local residents have been widely studied for four decades. Numerous researches have undertaken their perceptions, as well as attitudes towards the tourism impacts (Pizam, 1978; Sheldon & Var, 1984; Ap, 1992; Andereck et al, 2005). This focus is a result of recognizing the importance of measuring residents' perception toward tourism effects for long term success and sustainability of the tourism industry (Diedrich & Garcia-Buades, 2008).

The community reaction to the tourism development impacts is an important consideration for policies and planning in a developed tourism industry (Ap, 1992). However, studies on communities' perceptions toward tourism in Jordan are modest in number (Altaweel, 2003; Shunnaq & Otoum, 1999). Aqaba local community has never been undertaken in the context of tourism development. Thus, the present study is an attempt to demonstrate Aqaba tourism stakeholders' perception to the tourism socio-cultural impacts using social exchange and power theories. The study includes theoretical background related to the social exchange theory, in addition to a background of the study area followed by a brief methodology, main findings, and conclusion.

### 1.1. Theoretical Background

Studying residents' perception towards tourism impacts on the local community was conducted by many researchers who recognized that residents' satisfaction in a tourist destination is a base towards sustainable tourism. Despite this consensus among them, they had different theoretical orientations about residents' perception measurement. In this context, some models and theories were used and developed in many case studies in tourist destinations. The most used was the social exchange theory which leads, according to AP (1992), to that local residents are willing to enter into the exchange when they perceive that rewards exceed costs from this

exchange. Thus, this theory can confirm economic theories in terms of the exchange process when those who get rewards should bear all costs on the other side (Ap, 1990). Alternatively, other researchers have demonstrated that depending only on the social exchange theory could not lead to a rational measurement. Doxy's Irridex model (1975) was one of the oldest models for measuring residents' perception toward the tourism impacts on the community. The model suggests four stages that explain the nature of guest hosts' relationship. The first stage is euphoria in which locals are willing to receive ardently tourists, the second is apathy, the third is irritation, and the last is antagonism in which tourists' arrival to the destination increases remarkably and costs are greater than the rewards.

Butler's Tourism Area Life Cycle Model (1980) is considered a new developed Doxy's model dividing the resort life cycle into five stages: the exploration, the involvement, the development, the stabilization, and the decline. Within the changes which may happen in the destination during the five mentioned stages, the attitudes of local people will differ accordingly. Researchers such as (Gets, 1992) on Niagara Falls and Pennsylvania concluded that the two destinations were in a mature period which affect the way residents react to the tourism impacts. Alternatively, Lawton (2001) has referred to the inadequacy of the model to describe residents' perceptions toward the tourism development. However, the social exchange theory may work in the same way to Butler's model due to that Butler's model is based on Doxy's model.

Perdue, Long & Allen (1990)'s Model is based on the social exchange theory to be applied to rural communities in Colorado. One of the main added variables to the model is the future support to tourism development. The model was improved by many researchers such as (McGehee & Andereck, 2004; Mardigal, 1993). Such studies have demonstrated that predictor variables such as balance of power and dependency on tourism industry will lead to a better measurement. However, predictor factors such as the dependency on tourism can support the social exchange theory and lead, in the same time, to its thrust in terms of cost and benefits.

Accordingly, theories and models used for measuring residents' perceptions to tourism lead to the same social exchange theory thrust. Andereck et al (2005) mentioned that most studies' theoretical bases in this area have been social exchange theory. Nevertheless, in some cases, residents may perceive tourism impacts negatively despite the benefits they get from which exceed the costs referring to some factors related to their characteristics and their situation from the tourism development (McGehee & Andereck, 2004). In the same context, many authors supported these theories with additional predictor variables such as community attachment, knowledge about tourism, socio-demographic factors, and dependence on tourism. They argue that such factors may change the way residents react to the tourism impacts (Jurovski et al, 1997; Perdu et al, 1990; Andereck et al, 2005). Others have integrated further theories with the main one for the same purpose as Kayat (2002) did when he supported the social exchange theory with the power theory toward a better measurement for residents' perceptions in Linkawi Island in Malaysia. She concluded that this combination of the two theories is more useful than using the social exchange theory alone. In this case, power means local residents' ability that affects the processes of the tourism development in their own destination in order to fill and satisfy their desires and needs (Ap,1992). Additionally, he used further factors for more accuracy such as local values and dependence on tourism. Similarly, these additional factors or theories may lead implicitly or explicitly to the social exchange thrust.

Thus, this paper is an attempt to recognize Aqaba community stakeholders' perceptions, represented by tourism planners, tour operators and travel agencies' owners in Aqaba, to the new socio-cultural impacts which are remarkably appearing as a result of the tourism development in the city. The current study used the social exchange and power theories which concern a representative segment of Aqaba community.

## 1.2. Social Exchange Theory Concept

Generally, social exchange theory leads to that a person is willing to engage in an exchange if he/she can get rewards from it, and when the benefit from this exchange exceeds the costs (Skidmire, 1974). The successive development of the social exchange theory begins from Homans (1950, 1961), Blau (1964), and Emerson (1976) as a marginal utility theory, and later as a sociological and psychological tool.

These authors seem to have the same perspective about the theory definition that the one's behavior in the exchange process depends on the rationality which is here the extent of the rewards he can get from the exchange. Here, the exchange should be reciprocative to provide the benefits which mean that exchanging benefits between two actors should be conducted fairly to be willing to interact. Furthermore, the actors later will try to maximize the rewards from the interaction, and to be sure that the costs of the exchange will not exceed the benefits. Finally, the exchange could be understood by the one's power which means that the coercion should be absent.

In terms of local residents' perceptions and attitudes towards tourism development impacts, social exchange theory leads to that local residents who benefit from tourism, (employees in the sectors for example), react positively to it, whereas residents who do not get benefits tend to negatively react to it (Ap, 1992). However, in tourism, the theory may undertake the economic, environmental, and socio-cultural impact. Hence, changing local traditional consuming behavior represents a cost as negative cultural impact resulting the tourism development. This is to clarify that benefits and costs do not only concern the economic side (Jorouski & Joursoy, 2004). Gursoy et al (2002) have discussed the economic, environmental, and social impacts and examined their influence separately on locals' perceptions.

### **1.3 Socio-cultural Effects of Tourism**

By its important economic rewards, tourism sector improves largely residents' quality of life. Nevertheless, the socio-cultural impacts that tourism development causes are not always positive (Liu et al, 1987). Negative socio-cultural impacts may appear from unplanned tourism development such as crimes, social conflicts, pollution, overcrowding, acculturation, and family disruption (Brunt & Courtney, 1999; Ayres, 2000; Ratz, 2000; Small & Edwards, 2003; Akrapong, 2006; Eraqi, 2007). Tourism industry development can affect the social and cultural texture as well as the economic change in tourist destinations. This role that tourism plays in communities seems to be more evident in countries with rapid development process in the tourism sector. Local communities tend to react in order to exceed social and economic problems, especially when they suffer from foreign debts and the increasing unemployment rate. Thus, Socio-cultural impacts are results from this development (Mansfeld, 1992). Studies about tourism development and local communities have shown social conflicts as well as benefits by providing a theoretical understanding of these impacts. Uncontrolled tourism development may create tension between residents and tourists. This tension occurs between residents themselves, which may affect negatively the inbound tourism. Dogan (1989) referred to negative results such as local traditions decline, social conflicts, psychological tension, the increasing crime rates, and materialism. Alcohol and openness sex are so negative socio-cultural impacts of tourism (Eraqi, 2007), as well as gambling (Pizam, 1978). Gunn (1988) referred to both benefits and stress appearing from tourism development from the point of view that local residents are usually not experienced enough in tourism to exceed its stress and costs.

However, cost and benefit are definitely results from tourist destinations development (Jafari, 2002). On the other hand, studies have demonstrated positive socio-cultural impacts of tourism. Getz (1993) has refereed to some social and cultural benefits from tourism such as increasing the employment rates, improving the infrastructure and superstructure, creating further entertainment facilities, and enhancing local arts and identity. Brunt and Courtney (1999) stated that tourism may improve community services by adding new parks, cultural facilities and recreation. Liu and Var (1987) argued that residents react positively to the good cultural effects of tourism, which include cultural and historical exhibits that keep their identity, events, and cultural exchange.

### **Study Area**

The study was conducted with stakeholders in Aqaba city in Jordan. Historically, Aqaba has been inhabited 4000 BC because of its strategic location on the trading routes between the three old continents. It was a settlement of Edomites and Nabateans who extensively populated the city. It was mentioned in the Bible as 'Ezion-Gaber' in the iron age. Later, the Greeks and the Romans signed a clear existence in the city (Shunnaq, 1993). Aqaba is the only coastal city located in the far south of the country. The city is now the capital of Aqaba Governorate of about 100,000 people. Aqaba is important to the country as the only seaport located on the northern part of the red sea.

In 2002, the city has been transferred to a free economic zone called ASEZ (Aqaba Special Economic Zone), while ASEZA is (Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority). It has a financial and administrative autonomy in order to attract a lot of tourist and industrial external investment, as well as to create a local shopping centre southern Jordan. Aqaba borders both Saudi Arabia and Israeli entity. The city is also located at the head of Aqaba Gulf. Aqaba is known today as a diving center and beach resort and the core of what is called 'The Golden Triangle' which consists of the three important tourist destination (Petra, Wadi Rum, and Aqaba itself) (ASEZA, 2008).

According to the Aqaba tourism marketing strategy (2010-2015) reported by Jordan Tourism Development Project, the city has attracted a large external investment focusing mainly on resorts and five star hotels. These investments will exceed the eighteen billion US dollars. These great projects will be increasing the hotel rooms from 4,044 in 2009 to 8,243 by 2015.

Meanwhile, among the four hotel zones in Jordan, Aqaba is considered one. It received 427,421 overnight visitors in 2008 among the 3,728,709 that Jordan received in the same year. Depending on the intended increasing number of hotel rooms by 2015, the number of the city visitors will be at least doubled.

However, the strategy did not focus explicitly to the local community involvement or the impacts of the tourism development in Aqaba. On the other side, Aqaba people should recognize the role of tourism to develop their quality of life, especially that most of them expect increasing prices in all life sides as well as to protect their own culture by being partners with the policy makers. Thus, tourism should be a "Community Industry" (Murphy, 1985).

## METHODOLOGY

As mentioned above, many studies about residents' perceptions towards tourism development have used different theoretical orientations. Their study sample was conducted on local community members. In this study, qualitative approach has been adopted by interviewing twenty seven persons representing planners, policy makers, and tourism business owners from Aqaba during 2014's spring. However, qualitative research approach is widely used in tourism studies (Wall, 1997). The selected sample was asked eleven questions about their opinion and perception to the tourism development extent in Aqaba, its socio-cultural impacts on their community, and their future expectation of tourism in Aqaba regarding its further potential impacts on local people. Choosing leaders and decision makers in such studies is justified since they, usually, represent the popular voice as responsible in their communities (Eng & Parker, 1994). Additionally, their special knowledge and experiences of their community make them able to speak professionally about their community issues (Von Kroff et al, 1992). Similarly, in this study, business owners are decision makers' partners who affect directly the tourism development aspects of the city. They, therefore, are knowledgeable enough about its impacts.

Thematic analysis was used to deal with the collected data. According to Braun and Clarke, (2006, p. 79), thematic analysis is defined as:

*" Identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic".*

Themes captures important ideas about the data regarding the study questions and represent levels of patterned responses within the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Therefore, this study attempts to make an arrangement of the participants' ideas based on the importance scale of each idea with reference to the study purpose.

## FINDING

The study findings highlighted that the respondents mostly referred optimistically to the tourism development which is being conducted in Aqaba. This development is mainly represented by the huge investments focusing mainly on the accommodation industry and the increasing number of the international tourists visiting Aqaba. They, therefore, expect more success in the tourism development processes regarding the great projects being constructed. Further, the promotional programs that ASEZA intends to follow and the cooperation between

Jordanian and Egyptian tour operators to organize linked packages between the two countries will increase the tourists arrival number to Aqaba. In this context, one stated:

*"Although Amman is the capital city of Jordan and has 65% of the country hotel, Aqaba specialty will make it the first site in about 7 years".*

Another stated:

*"The most known indication of Aqaba tourism development is the (17 billion US dollar investment in hotels, resorts, and ancillary services between 2002-2017. This definitely will affect all economic sectors of the city".*

Concerning the socio-cultural impacts, responses differed between the planners and the business owners. Nevertheless, they were not pessimist about that. Some of them referred to potential negative effects. They argued that Aqaba residents are not always adequately aware to benefit from tourism. According to Gunn (1988), local residents in destinations do not have enough experience to benefit effectively from tourism and to exceed stress it makes.

Tow planners, among the study sample, referred to the ASEZA marketing strategy 2010-2015's main objectives. The tow basic related objectives according to the strategy are: Firstly, to widen the sales and distribution network, and to support productivity for the city's hotels. Secondly, to increase the awareness of Aqaba as a high quality holiday destination linking it to the archaeological site of Petra and the desert reserve of Wadi Rum, and to present Aqaba an attractive place to purchase holiday and retirement houses. Thus, the strategy did not involve local residents in tourism development, although it hinted to revive the local arts, folklore, and other traditional aspects. This vision, however, was in the context of how to present Aqaba to international visitors. It was confirmed that to achieve the sustainability of tourism in a destination, local people should be a basic component of strategies to be directly involved in the industry (Ap, 1992). In this context, one business owner said:

*"We cannot deny the great effort that the local authority of Aqaba is offering. Although, the new socio-cultural aspects appearing in Aqaba because of tourism should be controlled and be a priority in planning processes".*

On the opposite side, when one planner was asked about the same problem, he stated:

*"It is normal, even in the developed countries, that tourism development creates new socio-cultural aspects. So far in Aqaba, we have an acceptable level of change. We will react when the cultural change threatens our identity".*

Concerning the probability of establishing small tourism projects for residents, some respondents, who are planners, stated that there is no intention for that so far. Others confirmed that such projects should be the next priority, confirming that people anywhere look for firstly the economic benefits to accept their involvement in any process. A related finding in the study is that most people in Aqaba are away from tourist zone which leads to unawareness of the importance of tourism, while it may, according to respondents, protect residents from bad cultural effects. Respondents explained this distance, stating that only twenty three percent of tourism employees in the city are local despite the good salaries they may get. They linked this unwillingness to the traditional negative image of tourism careers. One said:

*"I cannot imagine how Aqaba people can benefit from tourism within their lack of awareness of the social and economic importance of tourism".*

In the same direction, another said:

*"How can we convince our youngs to work in hotels since tourism careers are socially unaccepted?".*

In this perspective, Jurowski & Gursoy (2004) referred to the role of distance that local people stay from tourist attractions They concluded that respondents who stay closest to the destination perceived tourism impacts

negatively. Alternatively, the study referred to the achieved public services development represented by improving infrastructures, superstructures, and leisure facilities.

However, planners in the study recognize the residents' bad impression about: Firstly, the expected future increasing prices of the real estates and the daily life costs. The study respondents did not deny this expectation, but they confirmed that local people should benefit from tourism to compensate the potential increasing prices. Secondly, their concern about the limited chances to enjoy the good beaches zones, mainly owned by high classified hotels. Planners in the study referred to that locals do not get preferential prices to enjoy the beach hotels. One stated:

*"We know well that most people in Aqaba are not able to enjoy the five star hotels' beaches because of the expensive entrance fees and services. In fact, we have to admit that this impact should be taken into consideration when reviewing our social strategies".*

One business owner stated:

*"It seems that a good percentage of Aqaba people will leave the city because of the increasing prices of all life aspects because of tourism investments".*

In terms of the exaggerated hotel services price in Aqaba, business owners in the study confirmed that it affects negatively the mass tourism in the city other than people deprivation.

Culturally, the study found out some new aspects that concern the international fast food and café shop chains that are changing many young's daily behaviours. In fact, the remarkable existence of the fast-food international chains in a destination, as a result of the high tourism demand, makes people lose their community function (Murphy, 1985). The study found out also that tourism development in the city did not enhance local traditions and arts. Regular and well organized local cultural events have never been held to be shown to tourists. One said:

*"I think that reviving local arts should be a result of tourism development in any destination. Unfortunately, this is not the case in Aqaba".*

Regarding the education, tourism development in Aqaba has increased the number of tourism and hospitality management students in Aqaba University College and the newly opened Jordan University. However, about 400 students from 2002 until now are still insufficient since the tourism sector in Aqaba will need more than 7000 employees by 2016 (ASEZA, 2008). Furthermore, ASEZA has offered a good number of scholarships to Aqaba students in the field of tourism and hospitality management for highly qualified local human resources. Such educational support is expected to increase remarkably by private and public sectors alike due to the huge future need for qualified human resources. This step, according to some respondents from ASEZA, has changed positively many parents' images about the tourism and hotel careers. Some planners said that the ASEZA tourism department invites occasionally members from the local community to clarify the significant roles of tourism in their quality of life. Another effort is a regular tour they organize to schools to present lectures about the importance of tourism and hospitality industry. However, they demonstrated a slow positive responsiveness of the local people. This creates a big challenge to adopt further effective manners to improve the local thinking rather than the typical visits and lectures. Regarding this point, one stated:

*"I think we have developed positively the local image toward tourism education and careers. Today, you see good numbers of female students in tourism and hospitality management. However, we wish more positive thinking".*

Another said:

*"It is clear that the number of tourism and hospitality students is increasing. However, many of them do not work in hotels and travel agencies after graduation".*

In terms of crimes, moral issues, and tourists' bad habits, the study found that Aqaba, compared to other local and regional destinations, is a good example. This positive view may be explained by Aqaba community's

unwillingness to be involved in tourism. The study accordingly showed that recognizing the extent of moral effects from tourism should be judged when there is a clear community participation in tourism.

## CONCLUSION

Social exchange theory is a good measurement tool for residents perceptions toward tourism development when they react depending on benefits and costs occurred from the exchange process. Indeed, community power in tourism works in terms of social exchange theory since it leads to that the more residents can control all or some sources required for the tourism development, the more they are willing to enter in the exchange. The ability of using tourism and leisure facilities is a good example of the community power in tourism. From the study findings, respondents' consensus showed the unwillingness of Aqaba residents to be involved in tourism because of their lack of knowledge about tourism socio-economic and cultural benefits. Business owners in the study referred to the importance of involving Aqaba residents economically in tourism to change their negative attitudes to the sector. They therefore confirm the social exchange theory thrust. Similarly, the negative traditional image of tourism sector among Aqaba community enhances this negative attitude which relates to a social and cultural image. Ap (1992) stated that the social exchange theory concerns not only the economic impacts, but also the socio-cultural impacts. However, the social criticism in this case is a cost from the exchange. Additionally, monopoly processes of the city beaches enhance residents' negative perception toward the tourism development when they are unable to use them with the same tourists' level. This perception confirms the correct usage of power theories in tourism.

It is agreed that real tourism impacts exceed clearly the impacts expected by the sector planners (Aref & Redzuan, 2007). The study showed an optimistic view by the tourism planners in Aqaba to the future impacts due to that Aqaba community is not yet integrated to tourism. Meanwhile, they were not convinced about their effort to enhance local residents' participation in tourism. Although, they referred implicitly to the significant role that residents play in the successful tourism development. Alternatively, they seemed to be focusing just on how to increase high classified hotels and resorts, and tourists' arrival number. Saveriades (2000) argued that any destination can sustain a level of acceptance of tourism development. In addition, development may cause socio-cultural deterioration and decline in visitors' experience. Hence, the study recommends tourism planners in the city to take into consideration the social carrying capacity. This to be achievable, they should refer to successful cases in this context towards tourism sustainability and the native culture protection as well as the social aspects in such a conservative community. This is necessary especially with the great expected number of visitors to Aqaba in the few coming years. Pizam (1978) referred to the negative perceptions toward tourism in destinations with high concentration of tourists. Aqaba authority is also recommended to involve Aqaba people in small tourist projects as a way to change their typical image about tourism. Local handicrafts, traditional costumes, and small shops are good examples.

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