

# Enhancing Local Community's Involvement and Empowerment through Practicing Cittaslow: Experiences from Goolwa, South Australia

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**Abstract.** This study attempted to investigate how and the extent to which Cittaslow philosophy and practice enhanced local community's involvement and empowerment in relation to tourism development from the sustainability's perspective. As an empirical study, a series of in-depth interviews with key stakeholders including local government, local business, and local community's members were conducted in Goolwa, the first Australian accredited Cittaslow town since 2007, located in South Australia. The results indicated that to a greater extent the accreditation and practice of Cittaslow philosophy in Goolwa increased a stronger and more effective collaboration amongst local community, business and residents as an essential element for achieving sustainability in tourism development. Not only did it encourage the local community's participation in decision making process from the beginning of tourism development, but also revitalised the locality and sense of place of Goolwa through promoting local specialities and produces, in particular food and wine products. The results also suggested that psychological and social aspects of local community's empowerment have been significantly enhanced after the establishment of Cittaslow. Yet, the economic empowerment of the local community was less experienced.

## 1 Introduction

The concept of 'Cittaslow', the so-called 'slow city movement', had an inspiration from the Slow Food movement which began in Italy in 1986, with an urgent need for an attempt to counteract an increasingly fast way of life in contemporary society being characterised as 'McDonaldisation of society' [1,2,3]. Cittaslow extends the Slow Food philosophy into cities and destinations and desires to provide a high quality and liveable place for local residents and thus to improve their well-being [4] as well as to support local governance [5]. Given the fact that both Cittaslow and sustainable tourism development concepts pursue socio-cultural, economic and environmental well-being of locals and visitors, these two concepts are deemed to share the core value and principles. Despite of this commonality, Cittaslow is a relatively new phenomenon, and thus it has not been discussed a great deal in the sustainable tourism context with a few exceptions [3,6].

Previous studies suggested that Cittaslow helps reduce the harmful effects of globalisation and sustain place identity by preserving its sense of place or local distinctiveness, which is essential part of

tourism development [5,7]. Mayor and Knox considered Cittaslow as a sustainable alternative urban development agenda that focuses on socio-economic well-being of the local community (e.g., skill building, job security), environmental protection (e.g., natural resources and biodiversity maintenance, promotion of renewable energy sources and recycling), and cultural strengths (e.g., paying attention to historic town, culture, sense of place and food events) [8]. It is noticed that locality and local communities are in the centre of the Cittaslow principle, and thus the importance of community participation and empowerment for sustainable tourism development is well sought through the Cittaslow practices. It has been acknowledged that one of the main difficulties in practicing the principles of sustainable tourism lies in collaboration of all possible stakeholders in terms of effective participation and consistent commitment from the stakeholders. In particular, local residents of community empowered to develop and manage own community must maintain control of tourism development by being involved in setting a tourism vision and developing goals and strategies [9]. As such, local community's empowerment becomes a driving force to a successful tourism development. With recognition of Cittaslow as an alternative implementation of sustainable tourism, this study aims to examine how and the extent to which Cittaslow philosophy and practice can enhance local community's involvement and empowerment in relation to tourism development and management from the local's perspective. This study achieves the research objective through the case study of Goolwa, Australia.

Goolwa, South Australia, is the first Australian Cittaslow member town officially accredited in 2007. Since 2007, the town has developed and promoted various new tourism activities and events by encouraging local community involvement. The Cittaslow Goolwa Tourism Group, which is one of the main community bodies, promotes Goolwa as a tourism destination by developing and managing a series of tourism events such as *Around Goolwa* so that the community provides visitors and local residents opportunities to explore the historical and heritage buildings and discover secrets of the town .

## 2 Local Community Empowerment For Active Involvement in Tourism

The concept of empowerment has been seen as a key theoretical term to describe the capacity of individuals or groups of a community to determine their own affairs in the context of community development [10]. Both tourism academics and practitioners especially in the context of community-based tourism have generated a growing body of literature on community empowerment and its role in enhancing the level of local community involvement [11,12,13]. Empowerment among locals is essential and crucial part of encouraging them to participate in tourism activities, as the involvement can affect people's lives such as self-esteem, knowledge, and new skill-building [14].

According to Cole, empowerment represents the highest level of participation at which communities become active agents of change and they have the ability to find solutions to their problems, make decisions, implement actions, and evaluate their solutions [15]. Community empowerment can be thus seen as a process in which local communities acquire the right and power to gather resources to meet their needs as well as make decision and control changes in order to achieve social justice and to maximise quality of their lives [14-17].

The empowerment is not uni-dimensional but multi-dimensional determining four dimensions of empowerment: economic, psychological, social and political [13,16]. *Economic empowerment* refers to a fair distribution of economic gains generated by tourism activities among local communities especially for disadvantaged groups including women and poor villagers rather than the local elite and external investors [16]. This economic empowerment therefore expects to provide long-term fiscal benefits to the local communities and create small business ownership.

*Psychological empowerment* refers to the extent to which members of local community have pride and self-esteem in their cultural traditions and natural values and have a positive belief in their future. This psychological empowerment will become visible when there is outside recognition and respect of the value of cultural traditions and natural heritage of local community [16]. This recognition may not

only increase community-pride but also make them enthusiastic about sharing their traditional knowledge and experience with visitors [18].

*Social empowerment* refers to the circumstance where sense of cohesion and integrity of local community is recognised and strengthened. Timothy suggests that the social empowerment can lead to the growth of confidence in a collective social identity and stewardship over resources, and thus increase the strong preservation of cultural traditions and the conservation of natural resources of the community [18].

*Political empowerment* refers to the extent to which all community members have a voice in the decision-making over the conception and implementation development process. As suggested by Scheyvens, if community members are to be politically empowered by controlling over tourism activities, the voices and concerns should guide the development of any tourism initiative from the feasibility stage through its implementation [17]. This research adopts these four dimensions of empowerment for data analysis in order to comprehensively understand the extent to which local's empowerment is achieved through Cittaslow.

### 3 Research Methods

There has been little research on dealing with the influence of the Cittaslow movement on local community involvement and empowerment in the context of tourism planning and development. It is therefore suggested that a qualitative research as an exploratory research is rationally supported to be conducted. The primary research data for this study was collected in October 2012 through in-depth interviews with various local community members. The interviewees were selected by using an initial judgement or purposive sampling, followed by snowball sampling whereby each interviewee was asked to establish other contacts for the research [19]. The precondition for recruiting interviewees was that they should have been involved in tourism business and lived in Goolwa long enough (at least 5 years) to be able to comment on the influence of Cittaslow on the local community involvement and empowerment by reflecting and comparing their own experiences between prior to and post of the adoption of Cittaslow. Seven local community members, who participated in interviews in total, range from a Cittaslow member of Goolwa to a local government officer to local business communities (i.e., the owner of local restaurant, café, souvenir shop, accommodation, and local food supplier).

For the data analysis, four steps of thematic framework suggested by Ritchie and Lewis were applied: (1) identifying initial themes and constructing an index; (2) labelling the data; (3) sorting the data by theme or concept; and (4) summarising or synthesising the data [20]. In addition, a combination of content analysis technique and textual interpretation was used to clarify the responses. No attempt at any modification of syntax or grammar to represent the best voice of the interviewees, and thus all quoted comments will be presented in the exact words of the interviewee in order to reflect the originality of the interview data.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 Prior to the Adoption and Accreditation of Cittaslow

As local community is directly or indirectly affected by tourism development, the significance of local community's participation for long-term sustainable tourism has been already highlighted in many previous studies [15, 21]. Prior to the adaptation and accreditation of Cittaslow in Goolwa, the local community perceived that their involvement in tourism planning and development was scarce. In this regard, Interviewee 2 commented that *"I had no idea about who the committee members were and who elected them. The tourism operators and business people were seldom encouraged to get involved in any decision making process. I mean they were literally not invited."* Such relationship with the government(s) (e.g., the council and the tourism organisation(s)) even resulted in lack of interaction

and engagement among the locals, as Interviewee 1 told that *“The business people, whether they are the owner of café, local restaurant, souvenir shop, or local garage, do their town business only. There is little engagement between them in the town.”*

Based on the conventional top-down approach, every initiative of decision-making, implementing and evaluating tourism development programmes was driven and managed by the central and local governments such as Fleurieu Peninsular Tourism Authority, Alexandrina Council, and South Australia Tourism Commission (hereafter SATC). It was evident from the above narratives of the interviewees that the local community merely participated in such activities unless otherwise requested, but in fact the community hardly felt that its members were encouraged and consequently included in any decision-making process. Rather, the community claimed that the local and central governments did not attempt to listen to the community’s voice. The following comment is exemplified:

Because the community was not given any power from the government, I mean the council, the SATC, something like that...I mean, if you don’t know what is happening, you can’t be outgoing in your sharing and also don’t feel like well I can help make a better decision, because they are all making their own decisions somewhere else without you (Interviewee 2).

There was not any cohesion or connection between the council, the business people, and the resident, and there was no real engagement or power from the vast majority of the community (Interviewee 7).

As Sebele suggested that the lack of local community’s involvement and participation in decision-making process was always challenging in the context of community-based tourism [22], the above findings confirm this by highlighting that local communities were not treated as an equal partner in tourism planning and development. This is similar to what Gang summarised from his study in the Chinese context whereby the government had a power and entirely controlled all tourism activities and thus the local communities were lacking in any active participation in tourism planning and development [23].

#### **4.2 Post-Cittaslow: Enhanced Local Community’s Involvement and Empowerment**

Although it took time for Goolwa and its various local communities to understand the concept and benefits of Cittaslow, all relevant stakeholders (e.g., the council, the Cittaslow committee, and the local community including tourism business) agreed that to a greater extent implementing Cittaslow in Goolwa was beneficial to the community in various ways. A stronger collaboration among the stakeholders was achieved and the stakeholders significantly changed their attitudes towards the equal importance of each stakeholder’s involvement in tourism planning and development. In this regard, both a local resident (Interviewee 2) and one of the local business community members (Interviewee 3) commented as below:

...Cittaslow is indeed encouraging all three important stakeholders to communicate and work together. They are the council (obviously headed by the Mayor), the community or local residents, and the local business community. It is important that we need all three parties get involved in any tourism planning and development activities. We cannot have just the council because it is the community that makes it work. We cannot have the community do it because you need council to be inside to make sure the infrastructure is all right...it is important to have the local business community on-board, because they are the ones that are operating and supporting Cittaslow... (Interviewee 2).

It was right after Cittaslow came in that the whole thing changed...people are getting more and more involved, and the council was listening to us (Interviewee 3).

Especially, the local community collectively articulated that they were gradually realising the significant role of Cittaslow in enhancing the level of their participation and involvement in tourism activities. The local residents were thus gradually changing their attitudes and perceptions towards the importance of their involvement in decision making process. Even, the level of interaction and engagement among the local residents and business communities was enhanced, as Interviewee 7 commented that “Cittaslow is a symbol of Goolwa..., and local shops have been seen to be engaged and the community’s ability to draw together for support is certainly evidenced.” Such improved community cohesion was considered as a main ingredient of social empowerment the local community perceived after the adoption of Cittaslow philology.

At the same time, both the council and the Cittaslow committee constantly highlighted the significance of local community involvement in sustaining the region’s tourism activities and resources. This change was clearly experienced by all the stakeholders as the major difference between prior- and post-Cittaslow. Furthermore, the local community was able to raise its collective voice and opinion on decision making process, and the following quotation from Interviewee 2 is exemplified: “when a new tourism related development is proposed, for example, if a company comes in Goolwa and suggests a business plan, now the locals can say ‘no’, if the business plan does not reflect what the community really wants”. As such, it is proven that political empowerment has also been enhanced since Cittaslow was established.

Two distinctive examples of active local community’s involvement in tourism planning and development process are related to the community garden project and the activities of food and wine sub-group. The former indeed encouraged many local residents as volunteers to take ownership of the town by decorating it and showing visitors where to go, what to see, and what to do. The latter led to a stronger collaboration among the locals who participated in the food and wine sub-group of the Cittaslow committee. Both the local community (Interviewee 6) and the local government (Interviewee 1) agree and support this change by commenting:

The community garden is a classic example to show you the local’s involvement in Goolwa...it is operated entirely by the volunteers, I mean the locals, and they like to get involved. It is a great showcase to let the locals know about their local products (Interviewee 1).

The garden became a good talking point for the locals and tourists who liked the idea of using local products... many local residents as volunteers took ownership of the town through the community garden project (Interviewee 6).

...they [food and wine sub-group] meet regularly and talk about what’s going on in their area, and their regular meetings are used as a means of communication among the locals, which is important... (Interviewee 1)

The significant shift from passive participation prior to Cittaslow to far more proactive involvement in this whole process of tourism planning and development after Cittaslow allowed the local community to take ownership of the town. Also, it led to the creation of self-esteem and community pride among the community, as Interviewee 3 suggests that “...in my opinion, the locals believe that it is a good thing to do, and they are proud to be part of Goolwa, and they want to put something back into the community.” Furthermore, the enhanced local community involvement in the process of tourism planning and development in Goolwa was strongly correlated with an increased level of perceived empowerment among the community members. To a greater extent all the respondents agreed that the local community in Goolwa perceived greater empowerment especially psychological and social dimensions after the adoption of Cittaslow. From the local residents’ perspective including local business community, psychological empowerment was strongly exemplified in the case of Goolwa, whereas social empowerment was much emphasised by the local council’s perspective. The following comments from the respondents are supportive:

It is not all about money, but it is about our pride and ownership of our town, giving back a bit of time and energy to the town to sustain 'what Goolwa is' (Interviewee 4).

...well, economic benefits or gains like employment opportunity would be an important aspect for the local's involvement, but I reckon, the self-esteem and pride of your own community would be much more important...you know... reason why we (Interviewee 3).

It is contrary to the findings of some previous studies highlighting that empowerment is achieved when local community gains economic benefits from tourism practices and consequently perceive economic empowerment was the turning point to enhance [24]. It is noteworthy that the economic empowerment was perceived through the value of time instead of monetary rewards in the case of Goolwa as Interviewee 4 commented that "I have seen many locals expressing their pride about promoting the food and leisure aspects of Goolwa. There is also a phrase we use for our visitors, that is, 'you're now on Goolwa time' which means everything slow down, people relax and let the day unfold." Although traditional meaning of economic empowerment was not visible in the form of financial distributions and the increase of income by tourism involvement, other three dimensions of empowerment, enhanced throughout the Cittaslow implementation positively influence on local community's involvement in tourism planning and development in Goolwa.

## 5 Conclusion

The results of this research suggest that Cittaslow can be a form of sustainable tourism destination and the practicality of sustainable tourism development, especially community involvement and empowerment is effectively achieved throughout the process of Cittaslow implementation. Not only enhanced Cittaslow adaptation the level of local community's involvement and empowerment, but also influenced the locals' attitudes and perceptions towards the importance of their involvement in decision-making process. The local community in Goolwa strongly supported the benefits of the adaptation and accreditation Cittaslow, and the active local community's engagement with development of local events and community garden project and promotion of locality essentially created saleable tourism activities in Goolwa. The development and management of these activities are decided and controlled by local residents, so that tourism not only benefits local communities, but also provides visitors a better opportunity to know Goolwa introduced and guided by local people. As such, sustainable tourism is highly likely to be maintained in Goolwa coupled with Cittaslow practices.

Weaker relationship between the locals and the council was the main factor that influenced the lack of local community's involvement and subsequent little empowerment. However, the adoption and accreditation of Cittaslow was a turning point of both the government (e.g., local council, various levels of tourism organisations) and the local community. Jamal and Stronza support the idea that the involvement of the local community in tourism development is vital in creating an understanding between government and the community about the use of local resources [25]. This approach brings about not only effective local resource management, but it also improves the distribution of the economic benefits of tourism, enhances local entrepreneurship, and creates a sense of community and positive attitudes by the locals toward tourism development activities. As proven in the case of Goolwa, enhanced political empowerment among local communities in Goolwa let the community and government bodies communicate better and the enhanced relationship facilitates the process of tourism development by improving the psychological and social empowerment as well.

This research does not clearly address the change of economic empowerment in contrast to other three types of empowerment. It is assumed that five years of the time period since Cittaslow accreditation might not be enough to perceive visible financial changes. As Cittaslow philosophy put the quality and slow pace in the centre of the movement, adoption and changes of Cittaslow paralleled with slow tourism movement do not quickly happen. To examine economic empowerment, the volume of visitors and their actual expenditure on local businesses are the considerations as well, so longitudinal study is necessary for the economic aspect of community empowerment. Regarding this,

future research remains and it will further investigate how economic empowerment is also related with other dimensions of empowerment.

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