

Community perceptions on tourism developments



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My personal study focus is to identify the community perception and their involvement in the tourism development activities. Research and methods of inquiry would include surveying and having discussions with the local Galle Fort community. The survey would be a semi structured questionnaire to allow for discussion around what benefits and what limitations and the subsequent effects on the local Galle Fort community of the ongoing tourist development. It is hoped to show whether the local Galle Fort community is in any position to gain these tourism benefits or whether a lack of experience, knowledge and education inhibits them from gaining any real benefits. It is expected that there will be mixed opinion about the gentrification of the Galle Fort area, with those who have been able to capitalise on the increasing tourism are naturally going to be inclined to hold positive views and agreeable attitudes towards development as opposed to those who have not been able to obtain any tangible benefits from the tourism development.

Galle is located on the Southern coast of Sri Lanka and is around 130 kilometers from Colombo and encompasses a greater area that includes the Galle-Matara region and is seen as a strategic geopolitical city with a rich history through the symbolic fort area which was built by the Dutch in the 1660s (Galle Heritage Foundation 2019). With the opening of the Southern Expressway, access from Colombo to Galle has improved immensely and subsequently, this has seen an increase in accessibility to the area and has

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created a growing need for development within the city (World Bank 2016). This increasing number of visitors through the area will only further increase with extensions to the Southern Expressway to Matara and Hambontota (World Bank 2016). As Galle becomes the prominent city in Sri Lanka's southern coastal development area, its future development needs to be considered in its regional context. The enclosed city of Galle Fort has become a tourist mecca with its narrow, bustling laneways and crumbling colonial relics, an ever-present scent of exotic spices and the incredible tropical setting. Presently, the area of Galle Fort is like no other in Sri Lanka with the European-feeling city set in the tropics and experiencing rapid gentrification through chic hotels, café and boutiques being used to restore the Dutch colonial buildings.

The local economy of Galle Fort is dominated by tourists with rise occurring during the 1990's when the Sri Lankan Government identified the area as one of as being of the country's key heritage and cultural tourism destinations as well as being declared as an archaeological reserve by the United Nations in 1969 and in 1998 UNESCO declared the area as a World Heritage site on the criteria of the outstanding universal value which emphasises the physical exceptionality of the site (UNESCO 2019). It was during the 1990's that the Galle Heritage Foundation was established to act as a unified entity to take action and responsibility of all stakeholders with the Galle Fort area particularly with the gentrification beginning to take place. A survey conducted by the ISURU Galle Fort Old Home Owners Association (2003), showed that there were 326 houses in the Galle Fort area that around 60 were in foreign ownership and of those 60 there were only 4

who were permanent residents of Galle Fort with most of the properties being purchased during 2003 when the government choose to encourage foreign investment through abolishing the 100% foreign land tax (Owens-Edmunds 2009). This caused an increase in conversion of houses in Galle Fort into boutique hotels and luxury accommodation and villas, as well as capitalising on the already high tourism profile of Galle Fort to establish café and shops to accommodate increasing amounts of tourism. Evidence of this increasing rise of gentrification is shown through Galle Fort's substantial community of European expats (Chilkoto 2015). The strong community of expats within Galle Fort was created when local residents of the Fort 20 years ago were keen to leave the fort in the hope of buying land in more prosperous areas. This was when the restoration of the old buildings in the fort began and the boutique tourism opportunities started (Chilkoto 2015). It was during this time that Galle Fort developed itself into being a destination not to miss in Sri Lanka.

Galle Fort has experienced many positive economic impacts from tourism including the new opportunity for businesses that have occurred to complement the increased tourism. Furthermore, rates of income have increased for locals who work as guest house owners, restaurants & cafes, tour companies and transport operators, shop keepers as well as other small business owners and local producers. Harrill (2004) explains that those in the local community who benefit from economic growth from the tourist industry are more supportive of the notion of gentrification and tourism planning because and accept the tradeoff between economic benefits and environmental or cultural costs. Consequently, this has meant that the local

community now have greater access to better employment opportunities in the tourism sector. With this increase in foreign investment, Galle Fort has experienced increased attention as an area for investor opportunity (Smith 1995). Unfortunately, the increase in foreigners to the area has also contributed to the displacement of some of the local Galle Fort community. While often increases in economic impacts are seen as being positive, there are also negative impacts with Galle Fort seeing land prices inflate with increasing numbers of foreigners purchasing houses and land in Galle Fort which has meant that the local community often feel like they have no choice, and are often encouraged by foreigners, to leave Galle Fort and sell their land (Stapleton 2017). Inflated land prices have also meant that there hasn't been an opportunity for locals to purchase houses or land within Galle Fort as they can no longer afford the inflated prices. In addition to the rising house and land prices, employment in Galle Fort has become problematic with the area marketed as a seasonal destination with peak season being from mid-December to March. Being able to assess and understand the impacts of gentrification within a local community is vital to ensuring the long-term success and sustainability of an area (Diedrich & Garcia-Buades 2009). Being able to continue on cultural activities provided by the local community means that local culture will be preserved through tourist development and gentrification of an area (Gursoy & Rutherford 2004).

The social implications that gentrification has brought to the Galle Fort community has meant the local residents have realised the greater social value of the area and the risks now posed due to the tourism and commercial gentrification occurring. While Galle Fort has been the

beneficiary of the ongoing and increasing development and tourist activities, the local Galle Fort community have not been able to benefit from the tourism development due to a range of issues including a lack of knowledge and experience in such development (Beeton 2006). This lack of education has meant that the community have varied opinions about the increasing development within Galle Fort. Naturally, those who have been able to capitalise on the benefits of the increased development feel positive to the notion of Galle Fort being gentrified while those who have not been able to gain any benefits feel more negatively towards the changes (Gunce 2003). The increased recognition of Galle Fort globally has brought not only social consequences but also heritage consequences with the local community fearing that Galle Fort could potentially be at risk of losing the architectural characteristics and cultural individualities that have made it become a place of international significance (Gnanapala & Sandaruwani 2016).

Authorities for the Galle Fort area need to be concerned about the community awareness and the capacity of being able to utilise community building programs so that the local community is able to benefit from tourism development while also ensuring that longer term viability and sustainability of the ongoing development. The attitude of a local community is integral for development because how they perceive the changes in their local community significantly contributes to the level of involvement that they will have towards tourism development (Nzama 2008) (Zhang et al. 2006). The local community is the key stakeholder in tourism development as they are the party that will be most affected by changes, whether that be in a positive or negative manner.

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