

From Sustainability to Regeneration: The Case of Principe Island's Tourism

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ABSTRACT

Like many Small Island Developing States (SIDS), Sao Tome and Principe faces economic vulnerabilities and structural challenges. These issues are particularly acute on the island of Principe due to its small size and double insularity. With limited resources, distant markets and a small-scale economy, the island has sought to sustain itself through tourism. This study assesses the viability of the current tourism development model, based on international investments, focused on ecotourism and sustainability. It also explores the transition to a more community-centred model, where tourism acts as an agent of environmental and social regeneration. Through fieldwork and interviews with various stakeholders, the study analyses the conditions, interests and opportunities for implementing this transition. The findings reveal converging interests that, if followed, could ensure a virtuous cycle in which environmental improvement enhances the attractiveness of the destination and the economic and social resilience of the local community.

Keywords: Natural dividend; Principe island; Regenerative tourism; Small island development states; Sustainable tourism

INTRODUCTION

Based on the geographical and economic reality of small island developing states and the emergence of tourism as a strategic activity for the development of many of these territories, this study focuses on a specific case: Principe island. This small island, part of the young country of Sao Tome and Principe in the Gulf of Guinea, is trying to implement a small-scale tourism model based on sustainability [1].

The island's isolation and tourism resources, such as its equatorial forest and idyllic beaches, combined with the support of international investors focused on quality and responsible tourism, have allowed for slow but sustained progress.

This study, through a literature review, territory characterization, resource inventory, tourism activity diagnosis and stakeholder interviews, analysed the current tourism model and its potential to evolve to ensure three fundamental pillars: Sustainability, improvement of local living conditions and environmental enhancement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Small Island Developing States (SIDS)

SIDS represent a diverse group of island territories that, despite their different geographic and economic realities, face unique social, economic and environmental vulnerabilities. The economic fragility and high vulnerability of SIDS to natural disasters and climate change have been the subject of many studies. Development constraints arise from several factors, notably limited natural and financial resources, excessive dependence on imports, small-scale and less competitive economies, and significant accessibility and communication challenges due to their insularity and dispersion [2].

To develop, SIDS have encouraged foreign investment, focusing on the exploitation of natural resources, finance and tourism. Despite common challenges, SIDS have diverse realities. In tourism, it is important to distinguish between warm-water islands, with high potential for sun, sea and beach tourism and cold-water islands, where nature and cultural tourism tend to dominate.

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Tourism has been crucial to the economic development of SIDS, but it has also brought complex challenges. While some destinations have become mass tourism hubs, others are still establishing their tourism sectors and exploring alternative development models. Critics argue that mainstream tourism development models promote international dependence, increase inequalities and provide limited benefits to local economies [3].

From sustainability to regenerative tourism and natural dividend

In response to criticisms of current tourism development models that emphasize demand growth, alternatives are being sought to ensure greater sustainability and benefits for local communities. Regenerative tourism emerges as an innovative, transformative approach that goes beyond sustainability. It aims to mitigate the negative impacts of tourism and improve visited areas and local community quality of life, creating positive socio-ecological systems.

According to Bellato and Pollock regenerative tourism harnesses local potential for tourism prosperity while generating net positive impacts by enhancing human and ecosystem regenerative capacity. This proactive approach, based on systemic structures and development processes, maintains the integrity of natural, social and environmental ecosystems through local cocreation. It empowers local communities and visitors to operate

harmoniously within interconnected socio-ecological systems. In recent years, several studies have emerged that aim to incorporate this paradigm into tourism planning and destination management while others focus on the demand side, particularly on conscious travel [4].

This paradigm is linked to other concepts, such as the natural dividend, associated with financial returns from sustainable and responsible management of natural assets. These dividends arise from practices that enhance the capacity of ecosystems to provide essential services, such as water and food, which are critical to the well-being of local people and visitors. According to Moses and Brigham, nature generates public goods. If well managed and valued by communities and authorities, these resources generate a natural dividend that should be a shared heritage.

Geography and tourism on Principe Island

With only 142 km² and just over 9,000 inhabitants, the small island of Principe is part of the republic of Sao Tome and Principe (STP). Located on the equator in the Gulf of Guinea and independent since 1975, this small island state has a fragile economy but is seen as a model of demographic transition in Central Africa (Table 1).

Table 1: Area, population and tourism in Sao Tome and Principe.

	Area		Population (2023)		Tourists	Beds
	Km ²	%	n.º	%	2019	2018
São Tomé	859	85.8	222750	96.1	27000	1734
Príncipe	142	14.2	9150	3.9	8000	224
STP	1001	100	231900	100	35000	1958

The country faces structural challenges common to many SIDS. Its small territory, population size and isolation affect the economy, leading to a reduced and undiversified productive base. Despite significant progress in recent decades, it remains highly dependent on international aid and suffers from high-income inequality.

Located about 150 km northeast of Sao Tome, the island of Principe, with only 142 km² and 4% of the national population, is characterized by a high insularity and isolation. Far from major markets, the island has regular air connections only with Sao Tome, by small aircraft. Its infrastructure is limited and aside from tourism, the economy largely relies on informal services, trade, subsistence agriculture and fishing. Most of the population is young and educated but has low levels of technical and higher education [5].

Despite limited resources, this volcanic island has great natural appeal, with 53% of its territory protected as a natural park. The abundance of lush peaks, a rugged coastline with paradise beaches, dense forests, low population density and scarce

infrastructure contribute to the image of an idyllic and authentic destination [6].

With the country's independence, significant social and economic changes occurred. During the colonial period, the economy was based on large plantation estates (roças), many of which were later abandoned. Some were subsequently leased to international groups for agricultural and tourism activities. Today, tourism is a key and emerging sector on Principe Island, mainly driven by investments from international groups, notably Here Be Dragons (HBD) and Africa's Eden, which have revitalized the sector by implementing sustainable practices in environmental, economic and social aspects. The strategic and marketing plan for tourism in Sao Tome and Principe 2018-2025 recommends the gradual evolution of the current tourism development model to ensure greater benefits for local communities while promoting biodiversity conservation and sustainable development resilient to climate change [7].

DISCUSSION

The seven interviewees, representing three stakeholder groups, consider Príncipe to target a medium-high market, focusing on tourists who value exclusivity, authenticity, eco-tourism and conscious travel. The island is known for its nature tourism, complemented by beach and cultural tourism. Strengths include the natural park, trails, beaches, waterfalls, historic plantations, local culture, safety and heritage sites.

Key challenges include accessibility, dependence on external investment, basic infrastructure, reliance on a single market, human resource skills and limited diversity of tourist experiences. Tourism development is driven by international investors, while the public sector is criticised for inaction and inefficiency. Greater community involvement, improved training and promotion of entrepreneurship are needed, as well as stakeholder collaboration and human resource development [8].

Raising awareness among residents and tourists is essential to reduce import dependency and promote the circular economy. Community involvement in the co-creation and delivery of tourism experiences is crucial to implementing a regenerative tourism model that benefits communities, tourists, tour operators and nature [9].

Recognizing that the enhancement of the tourism offer is a critical factor in destination development, this study analysed Príncipe's potential for developing tourism experiences. Using secondary sources, extensive fieldwork and collaboration with eight experts, a detailed inventory of the tourism resources of Príncipe was compiled and classified. Tourist products and experiences were then evaluated, and the potential for diversification and enhancement was analysed. Some hybrid experiences, combining natural and cultural resources, were also developed and integrated into the destination's offer [10].

CONCLUSION

This research highlights the high tourism potential and uniqueness of Príncipe's tourism development model, which

focuses on small-scale, quality and sustainable tourism but heavily depends on international investments and companies. Promoting tourism development with greater local community involvement and returns, supported by regenerative practices and enhanced natural dividends, can create a virtuous cycle where environmental improvements boost destination attractiveness, drawing more conscious tourists. The challenges are significant, making a gradual transition essential, involving skills development, infrastructure investment, human resource qualification, improved governance and stakeholder collaboration.

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