



GAINFUL EMPLOYMENT FROM A CULTURE OF HOSPITALITY – THE KYRGYZ WAY

Community-Based Tourism in Kyrgyzstan: A success story

In early 2013 the Kyrgyz Community-Based Tourism Association (KCBTA) sent a letter to HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, which concluded with the following sentence: «KCBTA is proud to announce that CBT Kyrgyzstan has reached financial sustainability after 10 years of operations and is looking forward to fruitful cooperation with Helvetas.» To receive such a letter from a national umbrella organisation is a rare joy for a development organisation. How did we get here? How did the 15 Community-Based Tourism (CBT) groups host tourists for more than 14,000 nights in 2013? That some 1,000 families generated income of US\$ 420,000 in some very remote areas of a country where almost 40% of the population still live below the poverty line? Semi-structured interviews with ten knowledge-bearers provide a few answers.



Community-Based Tourism not only generates income in remote areas but also contributes to an open society and raises people's pride in their own culture.

It all began in Kochkor, the main city of a district surrounded by breathtaking landscapes two hours' drive from the capital. A Swiss couple had settled there four years after the collapse of the Soviet Union; the husband was working for Helvetas. Impressed by the beautiful scenery, the wife started working with farmer families so that they would be ready to receive adventure tourists. This initially involved creating some B&B offers, arranging stays in yurts, developing a series of horse-riding treks, and producing traditional felt carpets. From 1999 onwards Helvetas supported this initiative more systematically through its Community-Based Tourism (CBT) Project.

«**Community-Based tourism** is a form of tourism where the local community has a substantial control over, and involvement in, its development and management, and a major proportion of the benefits remains within the community.»

World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Baktygulov 2010

KEY FACTORS FOR SUCCESS

CBT is now financially and institutionally sustainable. What were the key elements for success, aside from the beauty of the country, a comparably high level of education and reasonable basic infrastructure?

- **Local people in the centre:** Today CBT is owned by 287 members who provide accommodation for tourists. They are organised in 15 groups that are located in attractive sightseeing spots. Helvetas uncompromisingly fostered participation through a method called Appreciative Participatory Planning

and Action (APPA), which was brought to Kyrgyzstan through a South-South transfer of knowledge from the Mountain Institute in Nepal. APPA builds on assets and opportunities (such as the rich cultural heritage of the nomadic lifestyle) rather than focusing on problems.

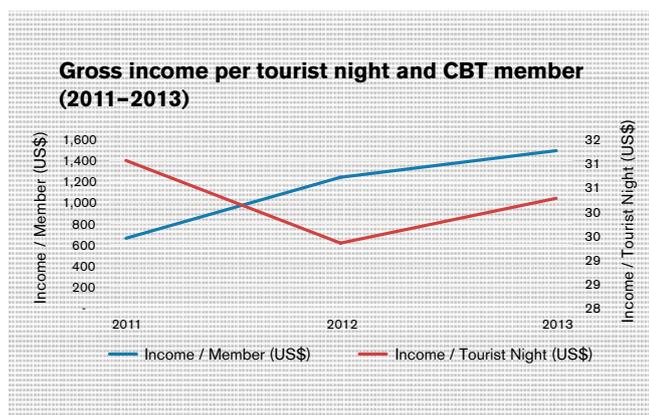
- **Continuity of support:** Helvetas supported CBT and the national umbrella organisation created in 2003 for six consecutive years from 1999 to 2005 on a relatively modest budget of less than US\$ 200,000 per year. There is a consensus among stakeholders that this time was necessary to anchor this innovative project sufficiently and to allow new institutions to mature. The main input from Helvetas was capacity-building for CBT group coordinators and members, facilitating exposure and exchanges of experience, and developing the tourism offer.
- **Market linkage at an early stage:** In 1999 former Helvetas collaborators founded the tourism development company «Novinomad». The idea was to create a business-based market link for the CBT groups to Western tourism agencies. Other tour operators saw Helvetas' support of a start-up credit of 25,000 USD as a market distortion, but Novinomad was the only tour operator that was ready to work with CBT groups at the time. Today CBT is collaborating with more than 20 tour operators. A second milestone was the first mentioning of CBT in the 2000 edition of renowned «Lonely Planet» travel guide.
- **Uniting the CBT groups in an umbrella organisation:** In 2002 Helvetas stimulated the CBT groups to create their own umbrella organisation. KCBTA runs an office in the capital and is open all year round (while rural tourism in Kyrgyzstan is sea-

sonal). KCBTA assures market linkages, advertises CBT offers, assures quality through a certification system (by allocating one to three «Edelweiss» to a homestay), arranges experience exchange, offers training and engages in product development such as horse treks and, more recently, bike-tours.

- Promotion of good governance principles:** After 70 years of forced collectivisation during the Soviet regime, Kyrgyz people were generally reluctant to collaborate with others. They place their trust in their family and clan members first. Helvetas introduced the good governance principles of participation, transparency and accountability to the CBT groups.

THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY-BASED TOURISM IN KYRGYZSTAN

A number of studies (e.g. Baktygulov 2010, Imashev 2011) document the positive effects of CBT on the economy of the families involved. In 2013, the average gross income from tourism per CBT member amounted to US\$ 1,480. The families invest in their houses (e.g. in water closets and showers), in assets and in their children's education. The tourists' payments for food and accommodation form the lion's share of this income. Most of the B&Bs are run by women and Imashev 2011 concludes that CBT makes an important contribution to women's economic and social empowerment. Beyond the 287 members, some 700 additional service providers (guides, horse owners, drivers, cooks, handicraft producers) have been able to improve their income. Supply and demand have grown in parallel – by 38%, in 2013 – while the income per tourist has remained stable over the last few years. CBT is merely a niche market at a macro-economic level. The Kyrgyz Association of Tour Operators (KATO) estimates the number of non-CIS tourists in 2013 to have been around 60,000 persons (personal communication); the share of non-CIS tourists that make use of CBT is therefore around 5%. There is crowding-in at several lev-



Source: Annual Reports of KCBTA

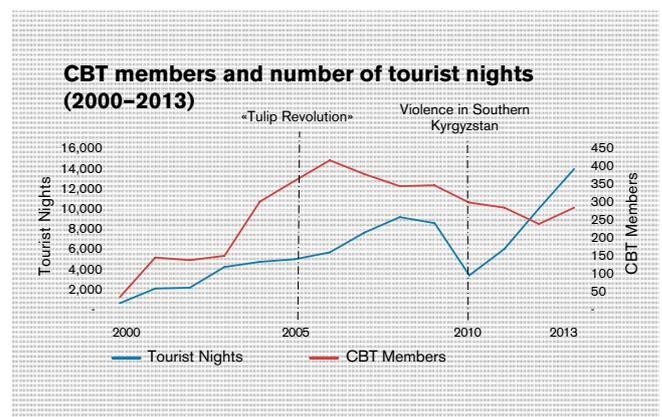
« I stayed in CBT guesthouses myself. In Kyrgyzstan, CBT is the most successful organisation in the sphere of tourism. To my mind most impressive is that through CBT ordinary people are earning good money. »

Chakiev Maksat Joldosbekovich
Deputy Minister, Director of the Department of Tourism

els. In places where demand is growing, non-CBT members offer similar services or are even investing in bigger guesthouses and hotels: in Kochkor alone there are currently five organisations offering B&B stays. The greatest example of crowding-in is at the level of tour operators, which either work through CBT or develop similar offers themselves. Apart from economic aspects, CBT contributes to an open society, raises people's pride in their own culture and creates awareness about the value of the area's natural beauty.

NO TOURISM WITHOUT PEACE AND POLITICAL STABILITY

After its independence in 1991 Kyrgyzstan chose a comparatively liberal and democratic path. Government policies and regulations make it easy to run a micro-business such as a B&B. CBT is in line with the government's strategy to diversify tourism. Recent developments – for which the tour operators lobbied hard – include the abolishment of visa requirements for 45 countries. The de facto monopoly of two international airlines to serve Kyrgyzstan was broken. At the same time tour operators complain that the government does little to market the country as a tourist destination. Kyrgyzstan has been



Source: Annual Reports of KCBTA



Traditional hospitality is the main trademark of Community-Based Tourism in Kyrgyzstan.

through two revolutions in the last ten years, as well as suffering an outbreak of violence in the southern part, which led to a collapse in visitor numbers. Political stability and peace are essential preconditions for a country's attractiveness as a tourist destination.

OUTLOOK AND CHALLENGES

CBT in Kyrgyzstan has a good potential to grow further, both by increasing the number of locations with active CBT groups, and through further diversification of supply. However, CBT faces three main challenges:

The brand name of KCBTA is «Hospitality Kyrgyzstan». It is indeed this traditional hospitality, the warm welcome, the attention paid to the client and the host's presence during meals that make the CBT offer unique. Yet it is these exact features that are at risk, as routine and money-mindedness are potential enemies of true **hospitality**.

The documented reflections on CBT in Kyrgyzstan discuss the influence of rural tourism on **equity**. It is common sense that first the better-off families who own a comparatively large and well-maintained house can ac-

« In all the years I made only good experiences with tourists. For example I had a Dutch girl as guest. First she came alone. Next year she visited me with her mother. The year after she brought her father. And in the following year husband. Perhaps she will soon visit me with her children. »

«Gugu» Gulbübü Karimshakova,
Bed&Breakfast provider in Kochkor

commodate guests. This is to a certain extent counter-balanced by including new B&B offers and additional service providers such as guides and drivers. The figures from the last few years, however, show that the number of CBT members is not expanding at the same pace as the number of tourists. Present members seem to be reluctant to integrate additional B&B providers so as to reduce competition and increase the own income.

CBT is committed to eco-tourism. In spite of internal guidelines, greater awareness and certain actions to protect the natural environment and collect **garbage**, these aspects are not the first thing on the service providers' minds. At particularly attractive destinations garbage – though not only caused by CBT tourists, of course – has become a serious problem that is threatening the fundamental capital of tourism to Kyrgyzstan: the country's beauty.

Selected references:

Baktygulov S., Raeva D. 2010: Creating Value for All. Community Based Tourism. UNESCO.

Imashev K., 2011: Contribution of Community Based Tourism to Poverty Reduction in Kyrgyzstan. Master Thesis at the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. Geneva.

KCBTA 2012 and 2013: Kyrgyz Community Based Tourism Association, Annual Report 2012 and draft Annual Report 2013

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