IMPACT AND INFLUENCE OF TOURISM IN MAURITIUS: 
THE CASE OF FLIC EN FLAC

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ABSTRACT

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide an insight on the impact and influence of tourism development in Mauritius, more particularly at Flic en Flac which is considered to be a major tourist area. This paper aims at highlighting the metamorphosis caused by tourism development on the rural community and also taking stock of the influence of tourism on the culture and lifestyles of the inhabitants.

Design/methodology/approach – In this paper use of both primary and secondary data has been made. Research methods used include document analysis, internet search, field observation, informal talks and interviews with fishermen, visitors, elderly inhabitants, youths, local businessmen, new settlers and community leaders.

Findings – The principal findings of this research indicate that considerable amount of infrastructural development has taken place in the village. However, the majority of the inhabitants are of the view that although tourism development has brought certain changes in their lifestyles yet there has been very little improvement in their living conditions as quite a large number of the locals are still struggling to make both ends meet.

Research implications – This paper has much relevance in the fast developing Mauritian society as it may help the authority at reviewing its strategies for tourism development throughout the country. Future sustenance of tourism development requires satisfaction of all participating stakeholders.

Originality/Value – The results of this study will be helpful to assist tourism planners in developing policies for tourism development that will be beneficial not only to the investors and the state but also to the locals with a view to improve their welfare and living conditions.

Keywords: Tourism, Tourism Development, Rural Community, Culture and Lifestyles.
INTRODUCTION

Mauritius is one of the most beautiful islands in the world. It is normally referred to as the rainbow nation. Travellers and visitors consider the island, set in its turquoise sea, as an oasis of peace and tranquillity in the Indian Ocean. Tourism is a major pillar of the Mauritian economy. Since 1970s, it has contributed enormously to cause economic growth and development in Mauritius. Tourist arrivals have been constantly increasing over the past years and the country is expecting to welcome about two million foreign visitors annually by 2015. Tourism causes changes in almost all spheres- economic, social, cultural, political or environmental- of the host community.

This paper is drawn from an on-going research on the impact and influence of tourism development in Mauritius. In this study, the focus will be on a major tourist area which is Flic en Flac. The main objectives of the paper, amongst others, are:

(a) To highlight the metamorphosis caused by tourism development on the rural community and
(b) To take stock of the influence of tourism on the culture and lifestyles of the inhabitants.

In this study use of both primary and secondary data has been made. Research methods used include document analysis, internet search, field observation, informal talks and interviews with 2 fishermen, 2 visitors, 4 elderly inhabitants, 4 youths, 2 local businessmen, 2 new settlers and 2 community leaders. The qualitative approach to data analysis resorted to in this paper and discussion help to get a better understanding and insight of the tourism development and its impact and influence in the village of Flic en Flac.

The first part of this paper deals with a brief review of tourism development and the positive and negative effects of tourism. Then follows, an overview of tourism development in Mauritius and more particularly at Flic en Flac. In the second part, data collected through informal talks and interviews will be analysed and discussed. Finally, a conclusion based on the paper will be stated and two recommendations made.

Tourism and Tourism development

The World Tourism Organisation defines tourism as comprising activities of people travelling to and staying in places outside their usual environment for not more than one consecutive year for business, leisure and other purposes. Tourism has become a major industry in all parts of the world. In Mauritius 871,356 tourists visited the island in 2009 and in 2011 tourists arrival has been estimated to be around 950,000 according to the Central Statistical Office (www.africanews.com/...tourism/). Tourism contributes to the extent of 10% of the Gross Domestic Product in Mauritius (business.mega.mu/.../tourist-arrival-mauritius).

Goeldner and Ritchie (2006) argue that tourism development should aim at providing a framework for improving the living standard of the people through the economic benefits of tourism. For them, tourism development must create the necessary space for recreational infrastructure that provides facilities to both tourists and residents. The local community
should be made aware of any innovation or development of infrastructure that cause disturbances in the area. Vivienne et al (2002) clearly state that responsible tourism development attempts to balance the needs of the locals with those of the promoters and tourists. The participation of the rural community leaders must be encouraged to ensure proper tourism development, thereby avoiding or at least limiting negative impacts. In his model of tourist development, Miossec’s (1976) (cited in Pearce, D. 2006, Tourist development) stresses changes in the provision of facilities and in the behaviour and attitudes of both the tourist promoters and the locals. As the tourist industry expands, the local attitudes towards such development may lead to the acceptance of tourism, resentment towards it or simply its rejection.

**Positive and negative effects of tourism**

Tourism development has significant impact on the economy and culture of the host population. It is a fact that such development is accompanied by positive and negative effects, both economic and social.

For Elliott (1997), Governments are a fact in tourism as they provide essential services and the necessary basic infrastructure for tourism development. The state involves in tourism mainly because of its economic importance. It is an undeniable fact that the tourism sector makes enormous contribution to cause economic development of a country. Many direct and indirect employments are created and tourism generates considerable amount for the host society. The economic benefits of tourism development such as the improvement in infrastructure and services, employment opportunities and increased business activities in the rural areas help to raise the quality of lives of the inhabitants. Doswell (1998) claims that tourism, promotes cultural exchange and creates an audience for the local arts, particularly for music, dance and handicrafts. Tourism enables locals to meet new people and learn new culture and lifestyles.

However, some people consider tourism as a curious modern disease that may negatively change the ways of life of the locals. For Mac Naught (1982), tourists may have undesirable ‘demonstrative effects’ on the residents. The culture of the tourist may cause cultural shocks to the locals. The behaviour and dress codes of the visitors are not always welcome by the natives, more particularly by the traditional inhabitants. Vivienne et al (2006) are also of the view that tourism can cause considerable social and cultural cost to the community.

**An Overview of Tourism Development in Mauritius**

Tourism is a main industry in Mauritius. It has been an important vehicle for socio-economic growth in the country. Tourism is growing and developing fast as the country is expecting to welcome around 2 million tourists by the year 2015. Consequently much importance is attached to tourism development which is thought to bring benefit to all tourism stakeholders. Tourism in Mauritius has always generated large amount of foreign revenues and the tourist industry has provided many direct and indirect employment to the Mauritian population. Tourism development means a holistic approach to the development of the tourist industry where all the stakeholders, that is, the investors, the clients, the employees and the community, gain out of the business operation. In fact, it involves broadening the ownership base such that more people benefit from the tourism industry, skills development, job and
Tourism development requires a very good planning on the part of the authority and the promoters. There are many factors that account for Mauritius as being a success story in attracting tourists. The fact that the country has a socio-economic and political stability remains the sine qua non for the constant increase in tourist arrivals over the last three decades. As a safe and stable holiday destination, Mauritius, with its subtropical climate, offers its excellent white sandy coral beaches beautiful lagoons to attract foreigners. The very hospitable nature of Mauritian population is an added value to welcoming tourists. The concern and marketing strategies used by the state also help tourism development in the island. According to the Country Report on Mauritius (www.fao.org/DOCREP/004/AB586E/AB586E03.htm0), tourist arrivals have been rising by more than 8 percent a year and the tourism industry has become one of the most dynamic sectors of the economy, accounting for 19 per cent of gross export earnings and providing employment directly and indirectly for about 50,000 people.

Given that the tourism continues to expand and that the country is expecting future growth in tourist arrivals, necessary investment should be done to develop and innovate further the infrastructure like the airport services and the building with up-to-date amenities that can accommodate international conferences, seminars and cultural events amongst others. The sustainability of tourism development necessitates a review of the tourism policies and developmental plans to make them more effective to respond to emerging challenges in the tourist area. Sustainable tourism development is premised on the responsibility of the government, the tourist industry and private tourism promoters to ensure that long-term prosperity and quality of life of the future generation is not placed at risk (www.unescap.org/tdw/Publications/TPTS.../Toreview_No22_2141.pdf). In Mauritius, the Tourism authority has already started to consider the effects of tourism on the environment and all precautions are being taken to avoid environmental degradation due to tourism development. The environment impact assessment is carried out rigorously before permit and licences are issued for the construction and innovation of buildings, in particular hotels and restaurants.

**Tourism in the rural community of Flic en Flac**

Flic en Flac is one of the most popular and renown places in Mauritius. It is in fact a small village which is found on the west coast of island with a population of around 1500 people comprising mostly Hindus and Christians. The village has one of the most beautiful beaches and an excellent lagoon where swimming is safe and various water sports can be practiced. Thousands of Mauritians and foreigners spend at least a day at the beach annually. During school holidays many Mauritian families rent apartments and bungalows which are located within a walking distance to the beach to spend memorable time with their children.

The first big and beautiful hotel namely La Pirogue Hotel was constructed in the midst 1970s. During that period, the inhabitants were given priorities by the hotel management when the recruitment exercise was done. Thus locals, both literate and illiterate, could get an employment at the hotel. Besides, the village of Flic En Flac has also witnessed considerable amount of infrastructural development and improvement since the start of the construction of La pirogue Hotel. The constructions of new roads and improvement of the existing ones and
the provision of safe water, electricity and telecommunication services were very much appreciated by the inhabitants.

The hotel was inaugurated in June 1976. The Government, under the leadership of Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, showed much commitment to go for tourism development in the island. Since then many hotels have been built. Today, there are many big hotels like Hilton, Sugar Beach, Sofitel and several small hotels in the region of Flic en Flac. The scenery of the village has completely changed with the coming of the new buildings, luxurious apartments, bungalows, beautiful restaurants, supermarkets and shops selling both handicrafts and trendy clothes. The state has recently invested much to market Flic en Flac as a safe place for both locals and tourists. CCTV cameras have been placed nearly everywhere in the village. Besides, facilities like cybercafé, banking, post office, casino, pharmacy, clinic and massage saloons are available to both locals and foreigners. The latter can also enjoy the sunny climatic condition, the calm sea and facilities like diving and deep sea fishing.

Tourism development at Flic en Flac has always been controlled and well managed by the District Council of the region as compared to such development in other parts of the island. Certain obligatory and strict rules had to be followed by business men and investors for the construction of buildings and for obtaining licences to operate small businesses and commercial outlets.

Transport services have also been considerably improved in the village. Residents and tourists can move easily from Flic en Flac to the major towns like Quatre-Bornes and Curepipe. There are also regular buses to and from the capital city of Port Louis. Taxis facilities and renting of cars are available but such services are not always within the reach of the locals.

**Gentrification as a consequence of Tourism Development**

Gentrification is a term that was coined by the sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964. He explained the process of gentrification as an invasion of working class quarters of London by middleclass people. For Ruth the process continues until all or the majority of the working class people are displaced (members.multimania.co.uk/gentrification/whatisgent.htm). Gentrification is the movement of affluent people into areas that were previous occupied by working class people. Normally the rich people buy property and land there. The Collins Concise Dictionary defines gentrification as a process by which middle-class people take up residence in a traditionally working –class area. With the development of tourism at Flic En Flac, a process of gentrification has taken place. Hundreds of people from the middle and upper classes, who are either locals from other regions or mauritians living abroad, have acquired land, bungalows, luxurious apartments and studios at Flic en Flac. However, the process of gentrification in Flic en Flac is different as most affluent people have acquired property not to reside there but to rent to foreigners or to the host population. Normally gentrification leads to the displacement of locals and poor natives. At Flic en Flac this has not happened. The reason behind it is that the majority of the inhabitants live in crown lands which have been leased to them by the authority against the payment of a relatively lower annual fee. The new comers have bought lands that belonged to the sugar estates or to the private land owners. Gentrification has lead to the creation dual type of residents, one very rich and one relatively very poor.
Analysis and Discussion

To get a better insight of the impact and influence of tourism development on the rural community of Flic en Flac, field work was carried out. Some questions were prepared to get information on the extent to which locals welcomed tourism development during the midst 1970s, their views on the infrastructural improvement, their experiences of living in one of the most famous tourist areas and the feelings about the changes brought in their culture and lifestyles.

To carry out the investigation, the methodology used included observation, informal talks and interviews with 16 locals and 2 visitors. Although such a methodology has its weakness and is often regarded as unethical, given that the researcher does not always reveal his identity, yet the strong point lies in the fact that respondents feel more at ease to interact and answer questions. Moreover, the possibility of probing becomes easier by using such a technique. The language used was mainly Creole with the exception of two cases where French was preferred as the respondents were visitors from Reunion island.

The first question put forward to the respondents was about their opinions and views of tourism development in their rural area. The majority of the respondents showed positive attitudes towards tourism. The elderly respondents recounted that inspite of some resistance at the initial stage of tourism development during the 1970s, most inhabitants were satisfied to see tourism coming to their village. The promoters and the government authority marketed the tourist project well and the native population was given hopes that employment creation in the hotel would be beneficial for people in the locality. The locals were happy and some 15 inhabitants, with little or no education, were trained and recruited by the La Pirogue hotel. As tourism development expanded during the 1980s with the construction of more hotels, bungalows and apartments, more jobs were created and many women were employed as maids. According to the respondents, many locals were having two jobs. Men who were working in the tourism sector were also part-time fishermen or agricultural labourers. However, when the tourist sector became stabilised after some years, the hotels preferred to get more skilled workers who came from other regions. Locals were no more given priorities as it was the case initially.

When asked about their views on tourism development, nearly all the respondents welcomed the improvement in infrastructural development in the area. Inhabitants felt certain improvements in their living conditions as many facilities were put to their disposal. Respondents availed themselves of the different facilities offered in the village. They could easily move to the different parts of the country as the public transport system was quite regular. However, all the four youth respondents were of the view that the village lacked spaces for youth development. For them, there was a lack of recreational activities in the region. The disco clubs and the restaurants were unaffordable for most of the youngsters of the village according one youth respondent. However, the two visitors from the reunion island were of different views. They claimed that Flic en Flac was a nice region to spend holidays as all the necessary infrastructures are available. When asked to name some, they gave examples of the massage saloons, the casino, the beautiful beach, the local restaurants and the Spar supermarket where provisions could be bought at low prices.

On the question regarding how they feel about living in one of the most prestigious tourist regions of the country, all the native respondents felt that they had become strangers in their
own local communities. For them, the new residents who have bought lands, bungalows and apartments treat them as low class and backward people. Whenever there is a robbery and any crime committed, the locals are blamed in the first instance. The respondents cited various cases where after authority inquiry it was found that in most cases the culprits were people who worked in Flic en Flac but were citizens of other villages. Gentrification and the influx of middle class people in areas where the poor live normally lead to the division of the society between the ‘us and them’ phenomenon. New residents would not mix with the poor locals and the latter are taken as scapegoats for any misfortune that hits the former. Besides, the majority of the local respondents, particularly the four elderly ones, stated that it is the native population of Flic en Flac who have facilitated the development and growth of so many hotels in the village yet they have neither been recognised nor given the opportunity to get involved in the tourism development. One of the elderly respondents, who was formerly a community leader, argues that the authority and the tourism promoters have fooled them at the initial stages of tourism development by promising the inhabitants that many advantages that would be accrued to them with the development projects. The locals believed them and accepted tourism and other related activities without resistance or complain.

When asked about the impact and influence of tourism on their culture and life style, the youth respondents felt that due to tourism they have learnt new lifestyles and new culture. They consider themselves to be modern. However, the majority of the respondents are of a different view. For them, tourists’ behaviour and their dress codes have negatively affected the traditional culture and values. Many a time, according to two respondents, their relatives had some form of cultural shock near the beach on seeing topless female tourists. The respondents go further to explain how some youngsters in the village do not listen to their parents. They want to stay trendy as the visitors and they spend all their money on fashionable products. Consequently, tensions and quarrels between children and parents have become frequent, which in some cases lead to family breakdown.

Conclusion

From the study, it has been found that tourism is a success story in Mauritius. Since independence, the state has given all the necessary infrastructural support to the growth and advancement of the tourist sector for the socio-economic development of the society. Tourism development in the rural areas has generated thousands of direct and indirect employment for the population, particularly for the locals in coastal villages. The paper shows that the residents of Flic en Flac welcomed the development and improvement of infrastructure taken place in the village due to tourism development. Inspite of the positive economic impact of tourism in the village, the local people are not given the opportunity to participate or to get involved in the tourism development projects. Practically nothing is done to improve the standards of the livings of the locals once the hotels start their operations. The inhabitants also note that tourism has had some negative effects on their cultural values and living conditions.

Recommendations

- Based on the study, it is recommended that government should encourage the use of the 2% mandatory Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) Tax paid by the hotels and other tourism related operators of the Flic en Flac region for the purpose of financing local projects that will improve the welfare and living conditions of the members of the local communities. For instance, the CSR may be used to support schooling of the
children from poor families and creating up to date recreational facilities for the young people. The Ministry of Social Integration together with the Ministry of Education and that of Gender can work in collaboration to help the local communities to come up with viable social projects to be financed by the CSR money.

- Tourism Development Policies should include training facilities and job placement opportunities to be offered to the locals with a view to facilitate their recruitment in the tourist sector. During school holidays, secondary level students of the rural areas could be given the opportunities to go for job placement in the hotels against the payment of some stipend.

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