

Abstract of MA thesis

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Homestay tourism and its impact on the local villager

Critical review of pro-poor tourism programs implemented in Sapa, Vietnam

Homestay tourism is a convenient way for both host and visitors to benefit from the interactions and cultural exchanges. The host is likely to gain understanding of their visitor's culture and language, and can make a little extra income. In return, the visitor is likely to acquire understanding of the local culture, traditions and rural lifestyle. This image, often romanticized by tour operators and international non-governmental organization (NGOs), does not tell the full story. As this thesis shows, a comprehensive systematic tourist industry is behind 'homestay tourism'. An industry fueled by well-intentioned, subsidized pro-poor tourism strategies of international and domestic NGOs. These pro-poor tourism strategies, designed to let the poor benefit from tourism, include *HITT homestay trainings* and are given to villagers to provide them with functional skills to operate their homestay. According to the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), one of the key organizations involved, the trainings aim to make an increasing contribution towards sustainable pro-poor growth of the informal tourism sector. The trainings as such are implemented in an almost identical fashion in countries as Vietnam, Southern Africa, Uganda, The Gambia, Nepal and the Caribbean.

This thesis is a case study about the effects of *HITT homestay trainings* for the villagers in Ta Van, a small village nearby the tourist hub of Sapa in the northern hill areas of Vietnam. The village is home to four different ethnic minority groups, among them the Giáy people (25%) and the Hmông (68%). The latter belong to one of the most economically disadvantaged minority groups in Vietnam. The case study shows that at the beginning, the families who receive the homestay trainings and open their houses for tourists, enjoy a modest increase in income. This corresponds to the underlying idea of pro-poor tourism strategies. But overtime other actors, such as tour operators and tour guides start to mingle in, most of them not sincerely concerned with the welfare of the villagers. The same applies to entrepreneurs, who are entering the village to open new businesses, such as souvenir shops, bars and even new 'authentic' homestays. With the result that the villagers' income declines rapidly. The homestay trainings largely focus on functional skills for operating a homestay, and seem to overlook marketing skills or trainings how to coop with new phenomena such as competition or extortion. The homestay owners are left to the mercy of the tour operators and tour guides, who

hold most grip on the tourism business in Ta Van village with their more systematic approaches. And the few who are fortunate to obtain a modest income from homestay tourism are at risk that the tour companies decide to shift their focus to one of the neighboring villages. This is likely to happen, because the 'authentic' rural atmosphere in Ta Van village is affected by the increasing numbers of visitors and the commercialization of the village by the new incoming entrepreneurs. This thesis shows that the implementation of a pro-poor tourism strategy, in this case the *HITT homestay training*, does not continue as a self-sustaining process. Better long-term guidance is required, including a less systematic approach and a better adjustment to the local situation.