

Participatory Tourism Development Through Asset-Based Community Innovation: A Case Study of Makoran and Qeshm Island, Iran

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Abstract

Tourism development in peripheral regions often suffers from extractive models that marginalize local communities and commodify cultural heritage without fostering endogenous growth. In response, this study investigates an innovative participatory approach to tourism development, implemented by the Mammute Urban Innovation Studio (MUIS) in Iran's Makoran region and Qeshm Island. By adopting asset-based community development (ABCD) and co-creation methodologies, MUIS facilitated local agency, cultural preservation, and entrepreneurial innovation. Drawing on participatory action research, narrative ethnography, and community asset mapping, this case study demonstrates how bottom-up, culturally sensitive strategies can transform marginalized regions into vibrant hubs of sustainable tourism. The findings contribute to emerging scholarship on inclusive tourism development, illustrating a scalable model that integrates local knowledge, cultural identity, and economic empowerment.

Keywords: Makoran region; Cultural identity; Economic empowerment; Regions; Tourism; Ecological resources; Strategies; Development strategies

Abbreviations: ABCD: Asset Based Community Development; PAR: Participatory Action Research; MUIS: Mammute Urban Innovation Studio; SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

Introduction

Tourism has long been heralded as a catalyst for economic development, yet its benefits remain unevenly distributed, particularly in peripheral regions of the Global South. Traditional top-down models often neglect the socio-cultural complexities of local communities, resulting in superficial interventions that fail to generate lasting impact [1]. In recent years, critical scholarships have called for a paradigm shift toward more inclusive, participatory, and sustainable approaches to tourism development [2]. The Mammute Urban Innovation Studio (MUIS), founded in 2018 in Iran, offers a pioneering example of such an approach.

Operating within socio-economically marginalized contexts, MUIS challenges conventional planning paradigms by centering community knowledge, cultural assets, and entrepreneurial

potential. Their work in the Makoran region and Qeshm Island, in the south of Iran, represents a radical reimagining of tourism development, rooted in asset-based community development and participatory co-creation. This short paper explores the theoretical underpinnings, methodological innovations, and practical outcomes of MUIS's interventions, offering insights into the transformative potential of community-led tourism innovation.

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of this study lies at the intersection of asset-based community development (ABCD), participatory design, and sustainable tourism theories. ABCD, as articulated by [3], shifts the development focus from community deficiencies to local assets, emphasizing the mobilization of existing social, cultural,

and ecological resources. This perspective has gained traction in tourism studies, where scholars advocate for community-driven strategies that harness endogenous capacities [4].

Complementing this, participatory design and co-creation frameworks offer methodologies for inclusive knowledge production and collaborative problem-solving [5]. In tourism contexts, co-creation facilitates authentic engagement, enabling communities to shape tourism experiences that reflect their values and identities [6]. Furthermore, the sustainable tourism discourse underscores the necessity of balancing economic growth with cultural preservation and environmental stewardship [7], advocating for models that foster community agency and resilience [6].

MUIS's approach synthesizes these frameworks, operationalizing a context-sensitive model of participatory tourism development that positions local communities as active agents of change. By leveraging the cultural, social, and ecological assets of Makoran and Qeshm Island, MUIS transcends extractive tourism models, fostering inclusive and sustainable economic ecosystems.

Innovative Methodological Contributions

This study employs a qualitative, participatory action research (PAR) methodology, integrating narrative ethnography, community asset mapping, and co-creation workshops. Unlike traditional research approaches that impose external expert knowledge, the MUIS methodology prioritizes local knowledge systems, ensuring that interventions are co-designed with and for the community.

Narrative ethnography served as a primary tool for capturing oral histories, cultural practices, and community aspirations, transforming intangible heritage into actionable development strategies. Participatory asset mapping enabled the identification of local resources, ranging from heritage sites and crafts to ecological landscapes and social networks. Co-creation workshops facilitated collaborative design processes, breaking down hierarchical knowledge structures and fostering collective ownership of tourism initiatives.

The research process was iterative and reflexive, allowing for continuous adaptation based on community feedback. Institutional partnerships with local municipalities, science parks, and NGOs provided technical support and ensured the scalability and sustainability of interventions. This methodological approach aligns with Creswell and Poth's (2018) emphasis on participatory inquiry as a means of generating contextually grounded and socially impactful knowledge.

Case Study Insights: Makoran and Qeshm Island, Iran

The Makoran region and Qeshm Island in southern Iran exemplify socio-economically peripheral areas rich in cultural and ecological assets but historically marginalized in national

development strategies. MUIS's intervention in these regions offers a compelling case of how participatory, asset-based methodologies can catalyze sustainable tourism development.

In Qeshm Island, encompassing 64 villages and six towns, MUIS facilitated the creation of 20 community-led startups focusing on eco-tourism, handicrafts, and cultural experiences. Through an extensive asset-mapping process, local narratives, architectural motifs, and artistic expressions were integrated into strategic tourism plans, ensuring cultural authenticity and community ownership. The establishment of a local innovation factory provided a physical space for entrepreneurship, cultural regeneration, and skill development. Furthermore, cultural preservation initiatives, including podcasts and oral storytelling events, transformed intangible heritage into living assets that contributed to the tourism economy.

The Makoran region, comprising 54 settlements, became a critical testing ground for scaling the MUIS model. Initiatives such as "LirGasht" for tourism guidance, "Gavara" for eco-agriculture, and "Puman" for mango-based product development exemplified how local identity and entrepreneurship could drive tourism innovation. Community-driven ventures were developed through participatory design workshops, fostering skills, creating employment opportunities, and reinforcing social cohesion.

Partnerships with institutions like the Sistan and Baluchistan and Hormozgan Science and Technology Parks ensured that these initiatives were embedded in broader regional development strategies.

MUIS's interventions in Makoran and Qeshm Island illustrate how co-creation processes can uncover latent community potential, transforming peripheral regions into dynamic hubs of cultural and economic innovation. These outcomes resonate with [8] assertion that cultural authenticity is central to sustainable tourism, as well as with [9] critique of development models that overlook local agency.

Discussion

The MUIS methodology represents a significant contribution to participatory tourism development, both theoretically and practically. Its radical localism challenges conventional planning paradigms that treat communities as passive recipients of externally designed solutions. By positioning community members as primary knowledge producers and economic architects, the methodology disrupts extractive models and fosters inclusive, sustainable development.

A key innovation lies in the integration of place-based branding strategies grounded in cultural identity. Through collaborative design processes, MUIS crafted branding narratives that unified diverse community initiatives, enhancing visibility and fostering a sense of collective ownership. This approach aligns with recent literature emphasizing the importance of cultural identity in place-making and tourism development [2,4].

Moreover, MUIS's model links spatial transformation with livelihood creation, demonstrating how urban regeneration and economic development can be mutually reinforced. The low-cost, high-impact nature of the interventions, leveraging existing community assets, presents a replicable and scalable model for other peripheral regions facing similar development challenges [10].

The Makoran and Qeshm case studies underscore the importance of participatory methodologies in fostering community agency, cultural preservation, and economic resilience. They illustrate that sustainable tourism development is not merely a matter of infrastructure or policy but requires a deep engagement with local histories, identities, and aspirations. This perspective aligns with the principles of sustainable development goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11 on inclusive and sustainable cities and communities.

Conclusion

The MUIS approach to tourism development in Makoran and Qeshm Island demonstrates the transformative potential of participatory, asset-based methodologies. By reimagining local communities as sources of innovation rather than objects of intervention, MUIS offers a compelling alternative to conventional development strategies. The MUIS model illustrates how co-creation, cultural authenticity, and community entrepreneurship can converge to create sustainable, inclusive tourism ecosystems.

This research contributes to evolving discourses on sustainable tourism, participatory urbanism, and community innovation, presenting a replicable model for community-led development. Future research should explore the long-term socio-economic impacts of this model, its adaptability across diverse contexts, and its integration into national and regional policy frameworks. The experiences of Makoran and Qeshm Island provide valuable lessons for rethinking tourism as a driver for inclusive and sustainable community development.

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