Preserving the Ifugao Rice Terraces

This case describes the programme to save the Ifugao Rice Terraces World Heritage Site in the Philippines, a combination of indigenous knowledge, community-based governance, innovative farming strategies, renewable energy management and sustainable forms of tourism.

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Summary
The Ifugao Rice Terraces in the Cordilleras of the Philippines represent one of the world’s most extraordinary and beautiful agricultural landscapes, created over hundreds of years. A World Heritage Site, they were temporarily classified as ‘endangered’ in 2001 when 30% of the terraces were seen to be uncultivated or neglected.

A community-based resource management strategy (CBRM) has been led by the non-profit organization Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMo) since the early 2000s. The core of the strategy is to link conservation goals, in particular the restoration of the terrace walls and irrigations systems, to livelihood development, primarily through the introduction of revenue-oriented activities, including fresh-water fish production and rice–vegetable farming. SITMo’s goals include transmitting and giving value to indigenous knowledge and skills; the introduction of innovative farming techniques; and the management of the terraces’ rich ecosystems and biodiversity.

SITMo’s Eco-cultural Tourism Program runs alongside these many other initiatives, to complement them. Activities for visitors are designed in partnership with the host communities, to avoid invasiveness but ensure an immersive experience. Also, to ensure that maximum economic benefit goes to local stakeholders. The aim is to progressively transfer the management of the programme to the local communities.

The value and interest of the case study
Tourism is not the central component of SITMo’s strategy to ensure a sustainable future for the terraces and their communities. The Ifugao communities operate as a sensitive ecosystem, where poorly managed tourism could be extremely damaging. This case demonstrates how important it is for tourism to find an optimum balance, within broader social goals.

The case also highlights positive impacts of tourism and emphasizes that the goal is not to fossilize the Ifugao culture but to allow it to evolve positively, at its own pace, in respect of its values and traditions.

Background
The Ifugao Rice Terraces, bounded by rugged peaks, are located within the Cordillera Central Mountains on the northern part of the island of Luzon, in the northernmost region of the Philippines archipelago.

A description of the Ifugao Terraces and its people provides a context for the cultural heritage interests that are increasing due to tourism. Traditionally, the lives of the Ifugao people revolved around the rice terraces. The terraces were also a symbol of socio-economic status in the community and were previously considered the most valuable property a person or family owned mainly because of their economic and socio-cultural value.

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to local families. Community livelihood heavily relied on the cultivation of the rice fields. Moreover, the Ifugaos considered the terraces as priceless treasures, as they had been maintained and handed down to them from their forefathers across many generations.

Across the annual rice terrace cycle are cultural rituals and festivities that are interwoven with the different stages of rice production. Nonetheless, these practices are now slowly diminishing due to various interlocking factors. Two of the major factors contributing to this slow loss are the introduction of Christianity and the educational curriculum, which is increasingly patterned after the Western education system. Previous unrestrained tourism development has also been indicated as one of the major culprits for this diminishing emphasis on the cultural traditions in rice terrace regions. These factors, in addition to others, are undermining the continuation of Ifugao cultural values and practices, and therefore threatening the sustainability of the rice terraces.

Although the rice terraces are threatened with numerous challenges, their great beauty as well as their socio-economic, cultural and environmental significance is not completely diminished at this point. The Ifugao Rice Terraces were inscribed into the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage List in 1995, which recognized the outstanding universal cultural value of the rice terraces. Though this was a significant step forward in the conservation of the rice terraces, UNESCO’s periodic monitoring of Ifugao revealed that the rice terraces were showing signs of deterioration. In 2001, a mission to the terraces from UNESCO reported that close to 30% of the terraces were showing some signs of being neglected or not being cultivated. The findings indicated that even with immediate measures being undertaken, there would be approximately a 10-year period of restoration and conservation needed.

From 2001, the Ifugao Rice Terraces were on the List of World Heritage Sites in Danger. This was due to key aspects, including: (i) abandonment of the terraces because of the neglected irrigation system and people leaving the area; (ii) unregulated development threatening the property; (iii) tourism needs not being addressed; and (iv) lack of an effective management system. The World Heritage Site has been taken off the endangered list more recently, due to more than 10 years of concerted effort. Responsible eco-cultural tourism, which includes a sustainable development programme, has improved, though a recent status report noted some concern and support for achieving further enhancement of sustainable tourism practices.

About the Save the Ifugao Terraces Movement (SITMo)

With strong support from the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM), the largest and oldest non-governmental organization in the Philippines, SITMo was formally launched in 2000. The overall purpose for setting up the organization was ‘to advance the campaign for the protection and rehabilitation of the Ifugao Rice Terraces’. The organization was established and registered at the Philippine Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) as a non-profit organization. The following are the organization’s vision, mission and goals:

- Vision: ‘Ifugao is economically developed and sustained as a World Heritage Site and a world-class ecotourism destination with people who are healthy and well-nourished, self-sufficient, educated, globally competitive and God-loving, living in harmony with nature and proud of their cultural identity.’
• Mission: ‘Build SITMo as a strong movement and the lead institution in the conservation of the Ifugao Rice Terraces and cultural heritage.’
• Goals: ‘Mainstream indigenous knowledge, skills and practices; Improve and sustain quality of life of the people; Rehabilitate and protect critical watersheds, ecosystems, and biodiversity; Support and advocate efforts for good governance; Continuous efforts on resource mobilization and movement building.’

To achieve the above organizational goals, SITMo formulated an integrated approach. The approach put together at least seven interrelated programmes to tackle terrace conservation. These include: (i) sustainable agriculture; (ii) natural resource management and livelihood; (iii) renewable energy development; (iv) indigenous knowledge transmission; (v) community-based land use planning; (vi) ecotourism; and (vii) local governance. The organization has indicated that these initiatives will enhance and save the Ifugao Rice Terraces from gradual demise as they are aimed at addressing the factors that endanger its world heritage. While SITMo has a wide array of programmes, this case will focus on the ecotourism programme of the organization and how it is linked to the conservation of the Rice Terraces.

SITMo’s Eco-cultural Tourism Program
Background and approaches

Acknowledging the threats to the long-term sustainability of the rice terraces and recognizing that tourism is among the leading threats, SITMo designed its innovative ecotourism programme as part of its strategy to conserve the terraces. In consideration of preserving and enhancing the rice terraces and the communities that live among them, SITMo designed and implemented a community-based tourism approach. The programme is referred to as the SITMo Eco-cultural Tourism Program. The new eco-cultural programme of SITMo provides for initiatives to address issues of cultural enhancement, economic stability, community engagement and authenticity of the visitor experience. Moreover, the programme is aimed at helping address the deterioration of the terraces’ watersheds and the declining interest of younger generation Ifugaos in their culture and the rice terraces.

The experience for visitors includes observation of various stages of agricultural activities and the interwoven cultural rituals and festivals across the annual rice production cycle. By highlighting the various seasonal phases of rice production in the terraces and engaging community members in the eco-cultural tourism packages, a prioritized, core product has been developed for the rice terrace experience. Tourists have direct and more realistic interaction with the host terrace communities through brief encounters, and participation in the various terrace activities, festivals and other cultural and adventure activities makes sure they are brought together and immersed in the experience.

The host community and its farmers are consulted in order to provide the least invasive experience to their activities, while allowing for the highest possible immersion into their local culture. Activities for visitors are well designed, communicated, and agreed to in order to create the best possible experience, while minimizing any possibility of hostility, invasiveness or negative impact. Tour-guiding and other services are provided primarily by members of the local Ifugao Rice Terrace host communities to ensure that maximum economic benefit goes to the local stakeholders, and meals and snacks of local delicacies are provided by the local community using locally grown vegetables and livestock. Every attempt is made to diversify activities and to cater to a wide variety of interests. Sites chosen as host communities include heritage areas and upland communities that do not regularly receive tourists, but have heritage resources that may be developed for tourism purposes. To maximize the visitor experience and immersion in the local culture and natural areas, adventure tourism (caving, spelunking, and river rafting) is also incorporated with other activities.

Cooperation and stakeholders’ relationships

In analysing the tourism and heritage conservation programme of SITMo, significant information was gathered and interviews conducted in the region. The analysis of SITMo’s reports and information gathered through interviews reveals the organization’s emphasis on a cooperative community approach to tourism and heritage conservation. Interviews included SITMo’s Eco-cultural Tourism Program Coordinator, Chief Operations Officer, Finance Officer, ecotourism volunteers and guides, and the supervising Tourism Operations Officer at the Ifugao Provincial Tourism Office. The method used in the development and implementation of the programme was not based on established models, but rather on local and regional practical knowledge on how to help arrest the prevailing issues besetting the rice terraces.
The informal nature of the Eco-cultural Tourism Program’s development resulted in significant challenges in understanding the approaches that led to successful outcomes. The following discussion provides a review of the interactions and cooperation approaches involved with the development and implementation of the SITMo’s eco-cultural tourism offerings.

Understanding various key players or stakeholders (those who impact, are involved in, or are potentially impacted by the operation) is vital when embarking upon sustainable tourism programmes or tourism and heritage conservation initiatives. In the case of SITMo’s Eco-cultural Tourism Program, those involved included the village communities, municipal local government units, travel agencies and the Department of Tourism. The figure below illustrates the present stakeholder cooperation set-up in the implementation of SITMo’s ecotourism programme.

The stakeholder cooperation set-up in the implementation of the tourism programme shows that SITMo is at the heart of the involved groups of stakeholders. The organization is, therefore, the focal point in coordinating, harmonizing and directing tourism initiatives for the conservation of the rice terraces. It likewise takes charge of eliciting support from other stakeholders, and connects together the heritage communities and other tourism stakeholders.

Additionally, SITMo acts as a local tour operator. It organizes, packages, sells and facilitates tours across the heritage areas. The tours are promoted with the help of staff personal contacts, Manila-based travel agencies and via the internet. Since SITMo is a non-profit organization, its main objective is to distribute the economic benefits from tourism to the host communities. The breakdown of the economic contributions of the tours is presented in the following section. The municipal local government units and the Department of Tourism provide marketing, funding and technical support, while the host communities provide the services for tourists. The municipal and village governments also enact local legislations in support of the programme.

At the community level, local organizations such as farmers’ groups and youth associations are active partners in the management of the tour packages. As hosts, the communities provide meals and snacks for visitors, giving them the opportunity to promote local delicacies, an important part of their intangible cultural heritage. Local farmers provide the vegetables and livestock for the meals, thereby generating additional income. Other local stakeholders participate by producing souvenir items for sale. At this stage, however, it is still premature to determine the economic impact of the tourism programme on the farmers, since the programme is still in its infancy.

Although SITMo is taking the lead role in promoting tourism for the conservation of the rice terraces, it plans to transfer the task to the terrace communities in the future. For this reason, the organization’s capacity-building activities are geared towards increasing tourism skills and management capabilities in the communities so that they can effectively and efficiently handle their own tourism operations in the future. When the communities are
considered capable enough to handle their tourism operations, SITMo may then shift its role to providing technical and marketing support to them. Moreover, SITMo may, in the future, also consider transferring its operations to other communities using the lessons learned from the existing pilot sites. The figure below illustrates that the host villages are expected to eventually take on a strong organizational role. Though this is yet to happen, host villages in the heritage areas are expected to eventually take charge in marketing their own tours and in coordinating their tourism initiatives with other stakeholders.

Weaknesses of stakeholder cooperation

While SITMo involved various stakeholders in the implementation of its programme, some key stakeholders were left out. These include the Ifugao Provincial Tourism Office (PTO), and the private sector; specifically, the local tourism businesses concentrated in Banaue municipality. SITMo’s weak relationship with the aforementioned key stakeholders might hinder the future success of its tourism programme, due to tensions between the organization and the operators of the existing businesses and the PTO.

The figure below illustrates SITMo’s present stakeholder relationships in the context of the broader picture of stakeholder cooperation in the Province of Ifugao. The straight lines indicate strong relationships and open communication, while the broken arrows indicate otherwise. It can be observed that SITMo has strong relationships with local communities, travel intermediaries and municipal governments, while its relationships with other stakeholders are relatively weak.

At present, the PTO and the local tourism businesses are the main players in the local tourism industry, and their initiatives are not directly designed to help conserve the terraces. Hence, while SITMo pursues its programme with the aim of contributing to the conservation of the rice terraces, the PTO and the local private sector might negate the organization’s initiatives. In addition, the PTO and the local businesses might look at SITMo as a competitor instead of as a partner. For these reasons, SITMo might want to look for areas of convergence and trade-offs with the aforementioned stakeholders. If SITMo wants to mainstream its programme to the government, it might be advantageous to involve the PTO and tap its human and financial resources. In addition, the PTO is the provincial government’s tourism arm, and has the capacity to influence municipal and village governments for tourism development.

As per the Stakeholder Cooperation Model prescribed by the World Tourism Organization, the stakeholder cooperation envisioned by SITMo seems to be on the right track. The attainment of sustainable tourism requires the involvement of all stakeholders that perform different but complementary roles. Drawing from this model suggests that SITMo can only achieve its goal successfully by involving the local private sector, the PTO and
other stakeholders to be successful with the Ifugao Terraces Movement. The figure below illustrates the adapted model for stakeholder cooperation for sustainable tourism. This adapted model does not suggest international organization involvement as is prevalent in other tourism stakeholder cooperation models.

**Outcomes from the Eco-cultural Tourism Program**

**Economic outcomes and contributions**

From the commencement of SITMo’s Eco-cultural Tourism Program in 2006, the organization was able to facilitate 23 packaged tours. The tours involved at least 530 participants: 70% domestic and 30% foreign tourists. The domestic tourists included university students, families, media people, researchers, conservationists and other...
individual vacationers. In like manner, the foreign tourists were mainly families, researchers, backpackers and conservation-oriented individuals. By 2012, SITMo facilitated eco-cultural tours, including 1822 visitors to Ifugao, of which 11% were local and 89% were foreign. At present the organization does not have a systematic data gathering and recording system on tourists’ profiles. The organization is considering, however, developing future data-gathering mechanisms crucial in understanding its tours, product development and marketing approaches.

SITMo’s Eco-cultural Tourism Program has been introduced slowly and steadily, acknowledging that tours may eventually move to a growth period, characterized by more tourists and increased sales. By this point, it will be important to have fully integrated techniques and sustainable tourism methods that incorporate community, cultural, economic, and world heritage needs and considerations into the management approach.

Although SITMo tour numbers are relatively low, those tourists are considered ‘quality tourists’. For the purposes of this case study, quality tourists are hereby defined as those who are culturally and environmentally sensitive and are willing to spend their money in a way that benefits them and the terrace communities. They may not necessarily be high spenders, but they are conscious that their expenditures benefit the local hosts. Also, quality tourists behave in a manner that creates the least negative socio-cultural impact to the local communities. From a sustainable tourism standpoint, high tourist arrival rates may not necessarily be beneficial, as they may have greater negative impacts upon the community than benefits, whereas a focus on quality tourists whose behaviours and expenditures have positive impacts to the local destination has been indicated to have strong merit for the SITMo eco-cultural tours.

For the first year of operation, SITMo’s Ecotourism Project was able to infuse a significant amount of money into the local economy, the Province of Ifugao (i.e. 1.6 million Philippine Pesos, or PhP, which is the equivalent of US$35,847). On average, each tour participant spent at least PhP3044 or $68 per tour package. Since the tours were usually on a 3-day package, the average daily tourist expenditure for each packaged tour was PhP1015 or $23. A small part of the tourism revenues are remitted to community organizations as their community trust fund.

The following figures illustrate the breakdown of tourist expenditures and community benefits for 2007.

From 2010 to 2012, the organization’s Eco-cultural Tourism Programme had stabilized and generated about PhP1.6–1.7 million to the province’s economy. The figure below illustrates the breakdown of economic contributions of the eco-cultural tours in 2012, including benefits to the communities. Although this provides an idea on where the tourist money was spent, it does not realistically provide information on the full economic impact of the programme. Measuring economic impacts requires the identification of target beneficiaries and determining their income level prior to the implementation of the programme. Such information, when gained in the future, will serve as a benchmark in measuring the impact of the programme on beneficiary income.

Environmental outcomes and contributions

To help address the depleting forests or terrace watersheds, part of the SITMo Tourism Program included conducting awareness-building activities in the communities and the inclusion of tree-planting in the tours. SITMo, in partnership with the Ujah Youth Organization in Banaue, jointly established a community nursery for indigenous tree species. Part of the tour package is for tourists to purchase seedlings from the nursery and plant them in the forests. The planted trees are number-coded to correspond with the recorded names of those tourists who planted them. Hence, the tourists can identify which trees they planted when they go back to the place in the future. Over the years, a number of hectares of the watershed have been planted with trees. The figure below shows coded trees planted by a tourist in a community nursery.

Another outcome of the programme was the increase in awareness and revitalization of organic farming. Although organic farming is still prevalent in the rice terraces, some farmers had started to use chemical fertilizers and pesticides, which are harmful to the environment. In the terrace areas where chemicals are used, endemic edible fish and shellfish or crustaceans diminished. The rice cycle tours, to some degree, increased awareness and helped develop an understanding of the importance of using traditional organic farming practices.

Cultural conservation poses a great challenge as the efforts might fall into the trap of fossilizing culture. Initiatives to preserve cultures can be disadvantageous as they might hamper the evolution or emergence of new or more dynamic cultures. On the other hand, the lack of conscious effort to conserve traditional cultures may lead to...
cultural homogenization and loss of cultural identity and diversity. There are distinct advantages to maintaining important traditional cultures, while embracing modern and emerging ones.

In the case of SITMo’s tourism programme, the objective was not to convince the terrace communities to go back to their traditional lifestyles, freeze them at a certain point in time, or return the people to their ancestors’ traditional lifestyles, but to help address the diminishing Ifugao indigenous knowledge systems contributing to the deterioration of the rice terraces. The rice cycle tours helped to maintain several aspects of indigenous knowledge, while diminishing ones were revitalized.

There is both potential opportunity and concern with other regional and international tour companies providing visitor access to the Ifugao Terraces, including additional seasonal rural and cultural experiences. Although these tours often utilize local and regional tour leaders and guides, this increased interest in customer experiences in the region will create a need for more strategic and operational sustainable tourism practices.

In the case of SITMo’s tourism programme, it was recognized that one of the major factors for the deterioration of the rice terraces was the gradual loss of indigenous knowledge systems. As a result of the organization’s
initiatives, aspects of indigenous knowledge are being revived and their importance is being recognized. These include the revitalization or strengthening of the following knowledge systems:

- terracing;
- indigenous trades and crafts;
- performing arts;
- organic farming; and
- religious rites and rituals.

Conclusions

The tourism programme SITMo was intended to help conserve the Ifugao World Heritage Sites. The findings of the SITMo Eco-cultural Tourism Program indicated that the current, as well as the envisioned, stakeholder cooperation set-up has been largely similar to the stakeholder cooperation model for sustainable tourism. When comparing SITMo to previous studies, however, based on the Sustainable Tourism Stakeholder Cooperation Model, the SITMo model may need to involve more stakeholders and improve on the interrelationships between stakeholders in order to successfully achieve the programme objectives.

Though some weaknesses have been shown in the process of development and implementation, outcomes of the SITMo tourism approach are generally constructive. These include economic outcomes and contributions, environmental outcomes and contributions, and contribution to cultural conservation. The findings revealed that the particular outcomes of the programme made significant contributions to the conservation of the World Heritage Sites. This was shown in the revitalization of diminishing Ifugao cultural practices, provision and spreading of the tourism economic benefits to different heritage communities and stakeholders, especially the farmers, who barely benefitted from the industry throughout the history of tourism in the province. Some outcomes of the programme likewise showed a modest, but significant, contribution to the restoration of the environment, particularly the terrace watersheds.

References


