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Stakeholder stories: Exploring social tourism networks

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ABSTRACT

Social tourism networks are uniquely diverse, as they include beneficiaries who are usually excluded from tourism participation. They often rely on collaborations with social organisations outside of tourism. This paper discusses the 'Large Scale Listening' project conducted by the Holiday Participation Centre, the social tourism division of Tourism Flanders (Belgium). In the project, 1004 micro-narratives were collected. After narrators told their stories, they were presented with a list of follow-up questions that allowed them to tag and code their own stories, enabling them to directly influence how their stories were interpreted. The findings of the study highlight a joint commitment to social tourism, but differences in perspectives between different stakeholder groups in terms of the travel participation enablers and inhibitors.

Introduction

Social tourism organisations, while they differ widely in their structure, scope and operational model, share a key characteristic: their stakeholder network is diverse, and unique in the tourism sector. They are often situated at the crossroads between the social and the commercial, and focus on a target group the rest of the sector tends to mostly ignore. Collaborations may be formed between organisations who would be unlikely to partner in other circumstances: for example, between social organisations (public and/or not-for-profit) and private tourism businesses. The travellers themselves are also unique, as social tourism allows people to participate in travel who would otherwise be unlikely to be represented. This diversity results in social tourism networks that are multi-faceted and inclusive, representing a wealth of perspectives and contexts.

To illustrate this point, we can consider the social tourism organisation that is the focus of this paper. The Holiday Participation Centre (Flanders, Belgium) acts as the facilitator among a network of tourism and social organisations: the majority of stakeholders are in the public and not-for-profit sectors. This applies to all social organisations, and many tourism organisations, such as youth hostels and traditional social tourism holiday centres. The Holiday Participation Centre for example has certified 587 accommodation providers as social tourism providers (representing over 45,000 beds), which allows these to apply for social tourism subsidies. The large majority of these providers operate in youth tourism (Tourism Flanders, 2018). However, the Tourism Participation Centre also has stakeholders in its network from the private sector. It offers discounted stays at bed and breakfasts and chain hotels such as Ibis, and discounted admittance to private attractions, museums and events. The beneficiaries of social tourism are another important stakeholder group, as are its employees. Most of the Centre's stakeholders are external and autonomous: 'Stakeholders are autonomous when they retain independent decision-making powers even when they agree to work with each other within a framework of rules or other expectations' (Bramwell & Lane, 2000, p. 5).

Stakeholder research in tourism is by no means rare (for example see Sautter & Leisen, 1999, Tosun, 2000, Bramwell & Lane, 2000, Timothy & Tosun, 2003, Timur & Getz, 2008). Recurring themes in the literature are partnership types and structures, power relations, participation in decision making and challenges in stakeholder management. Often, the effective engagement of

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stakeholders is presented as a prerequisite to effective and sustainable tourism planning: 'the fragmented nature of the industry is advocated as the main need for cooperation, as there are many different stakeholders who have interests in the tourism planning process. It is only through a process of shared information and decision making with all the stakeholders involved that tourism planning can evolve with minimal negative impacts' (Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002, p. 72). Yet despite its benefits, effective stakeholder involvement is complex, problematic and often underestimated (Friedman & Miles, 2006; Jamal & Getz, 1999; Mowforth & Munt, 2003). Stakeholder engagement processes are designed to act as a sensing mechanism to capture information about the interests and expectations of stakeholders (Sloan, 2009, p. 34). This paper will review an innovative and ambitious initiative that aimed to leverage the knowledge and perspectives of the extensive stakeholder network of the Holiday Participation Centre in 2017 and 2018. Titled 'Large Scale Listening', the Centre applied a cutting-edge method based on narrative analysis that enabled respondents to not only share their stories, but also to have a say in how their stories were interpreted. The goal of the project was explorative: the project aimed to gather stakeholder perspectives on where partnerships and their outcomes are strong, and where there are challenges that the Centre could potentially alleviate. It was the objective that the outcomes of this project would help to facilitate the Centre's success by enhancing the level of stakeholder involvement, which can contribute to introducing change and improvement (Bramwell & Lane, 2000). This paper will review the outcomes of this unique approach to extensive stakeholder consultation through listening.

(Social) tourism stakeholders

According to Freeman (1984, p. 46) a stakeholder in an organisation is any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives. Stakeholder networks are characterized by a range of participants that surpass organisational boundaries and structures. Network members are committed to a set of common goals, and possibly, common world views. This 'connectedness', in turn, enables opportunities for the transfer and sharing knowledge (Presenza & Cipollina, 2010). For an organisation to be successful, 'consideration should be given to each stakeholder group, regardless of the relative power held by each. Management must proactively seek out inputs from all groups, as some will have stronger voices than others and this should not determine the priority of management's attention' (Sautter & Leisen, 1999, p. 314). Stakeholder engagement is one of the key parameters used to identify socially responsible companies: it is likely to increase accountability, strengthening trust and corporate credibility (Sloan, 2009).

In tourism planning, the possibilities for collaboration are complicated due to the existence of multiple and varied organisations that often hold widely different viewpoints and have differing vested interests (Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002, p. 73). In this context, a stakeholder in the tourism industry is deemed to be anyone who is impacted on by tourism development, in both a positive or negative way. 'Problems are evident with this inclusive approach, as it raises questions as to who is qualified or best placed to take decisions. Many people will have opinions, but not necessarily the experience to formalise or implement their views' (Ladkin & Bertramini, 2002, p. 73–74). In their review of tourism network research, van der Zee and Vanneste (2015) note that the network concept came to the fore in the tourism literature at the end of the 1990s (Hall, 1999; Jamal & Getz, 1995; Tremblay, 1998). They highlight research expanded in two pillars: one that focused on policy networks (building upon Hall, 1999 and Jamal & Getz, 1995) and business networks (building upon Tremblay, 1998). In recent years, two additional clusters of papers have emerged that try to bridge the gap between these two fields: one labelled 'network co-opetition' due to the dominant proposition that destinations benefit from a balanced web of relations between stakeholders; and one labelled 'holistic', which is described as basing its analysis on a mathematical conceptualisation of the network as a collection of network nodes and ties with a distinguishable structure, and approaching the network as an entity and not a mere concept (van der Zee & Vanneste, 2015).

While stakeholder research is not uncommon in the tourism literature, the subject has been but sparsely addressed in the field of social tourism, despite the fact that social tourism networks are unique in their make-up. Stakeholders are discussed in social tourism research, however they are often merely described in the study context (e.g. Cisneros-Martínez, McCabe, & Fernández-Morales, 2018; McCabe, Joldersma, & Li, 2010; Morgan, Pritchard, & Sedgley, 2015; Pyke, Pyke, & Watuwa, 2019) – the relationships and partnerships between different stakeholder groups has received relatively little attention. An exception is Diekmann, McCabe, and Minnaert (2011) discussion on social tourism systems in the European Union. The paper explores the demand aspect (beneficiaries and social organisations), supply aspect (tourism and social tourism providers) and intermediary aspect (social tourism organisations) of different social tourism systems across Europe, highlighting that while there are a lot of similarities on the demand side, the supply side and the funding structures for intermediary organisations are often vastly different. The common aspects of the demand side are that social tourism goals are generally directed towards groups in society that are excluded from tourism. The common aspects in terms of the supply side include transport, accommodation and destination services; however attractions and destination services are included in few networks only. The study showed strong variations in funding structures, ranging between direct public funding, indirect public funding, funding by trade unions and social tourism organisations, or self-funding by charities and fate groups (Diekmann et al., 2011). The paper does not discuss partnership and stakeholder relationships within specific social tourism systems: instead, it provides an overview of the different systems in operation in Europe. To add to our existing knowledge in this field, this study aims to explore stakeholder networks in one particular social tourism system. It will do so based on 'proactively seeking out inputs from all groups' (Sautter & Leisen, 1999, p. 314), through the lens of organisational listening.

The importance of listening, the power of stories

Organisational listening

The 'Large Scale Listening' project is a particularly apt vehicle for the exploration of social tourism stakeholder networks. The project was based on the principles or organisational listening: it recognises that most organisational communications consist of speaking to express and amplify the voice of an organisation. Listening is a much rarer component: while communication and dialogue are conceptualized as two-way and interactive, they are often operationalized as turn-taking in speaking, with little if any focus on listening. Macnamara (2016) refers to this phenomenon as a deficit of listening, which 'renders voice valueless for many and ultimately denies representation and recognition' (p. 21). Organisational listening can therefore play a meaningful role in stakeholder engagement, particularly in networks which include stakeholders whose voice is rarely heard, such as social tourism organisations and beneficiaries.

Organisational listening is defined as 'not simply limited to the listening skills that employees do or do not possess, but includes the environment in which listening occurs that is shaped by the organisation and is when one of the characteristics of the organisational image' (Flynn, Valikoski, & Grau, 2008, p. 143). 'Organisational comprises the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies, and practices applied by an organisation to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and publics' (Macnamara, 2016, p. 52).

Brownell (2015, p. 4) argues that listening is vital for organisational success: 'Organisations are intricate webs of interrelationships, and listening well allows you to ask good questions, make better decisions, and communicate more clearly because you understand the other person's point of view'. Stivers (1994, p. 368) adds that "listening is important because it helps administrators glean important information, define situations more carefully, hear neglected aspects and interests, and facilitate just and prudent action in often turbulent environments. Listening offers the possibility for a real 'reinvention' of agency policy and management processes, one that vivifies the common space occupied by citizens and bureaucrats and offers prospects of substantive community". To ensure its continuing success, the Holiday Participation Centre turned to organisational listening so it could identify opportunities for reinvention.

Burnside-Lawry (2011) cautions that effective listening and meaningful dialogue involve more than providing forums (places to talk), and voice (an ability to speak for ourselves). Brownell (2015) introduces the HURIER model of listening: an acronym for the components of hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating and responding:

- Hearing: An individual making decisions about what to focus attention on within the context of an environment filled with stimulus options.
- Understanding: The information processing phase corresponding to comprehension and addressing the literal meaning of the words or signs received.
- Remembering: The listener's ability to act on what is received, either immediately or at some later point in time.
- Interpreting: The listener identifying verbal and nonverbal cues, as well as contextual knowledge, to be considered in assigning meaning.
- Evaluating: The phase of assessing information by weighing evidence and reasoning, recognizing emotional appeals, and drawing other conclusions that will affect the subsequent listening response.
- Responding: The verbal or non-verbal message that is the outcome of effective listening.

Burnside-Lawry (2011, p. 104) defines listening competency as "the presence of affective, cognitive, and behavioral attributes that contribute to 'accuracy,' the perception that the listener has accurately received and understood the message sent, and 'effectiveness,' where the listener demonstrates supportive behavior to enhance the relationship between speaker and listener". Stivers (1994, p. 366) also highlights that a supportive and non-judgmental attitude of the listener is vital to effective listening: 'Listening calls our attention to emergent aspects of situations and leads us in the direction of contextual rather than eternal (timeless) truth. In part because of this essential openness and relativity, the act of listening to another person is characterized by reciprocity and a committed letting-be'. For this to happen, 'it is important to ensure that time is spent building rapport, and there is an atmosphere of acceptance in a suitable environment to enhance the comfort and safety of the storyteller' (East, Jackson, O'Brien, & Peters, 2010, p. 19). In a similar vein, De Bussy (2010) defines dialogue as a basis for stakeholder engagement, and identifies three key attributes that operationalize dialogue: listening, positive regard and willing ness to change. Listening includes suspension of judgement and empathy. Positive regard refers to 'treating persons as persons': no stakeholder may be used as a means to the ends of another without having the right to participate fully in the relevant decision. Willingness to change emphasizes that a dialogue is far more than a mere exchange of ideas: participants must enter into dialogue with the intent to reach an understanding, and the willingness to change one's own position in response to the other. This requirement played an important role in the design of the 'Large Scale Listening' project and the training of its facilitators, as will be discussed in Section 4 of this paper.

Narratives and narrative analysis

The 'Large Scale Listening' project was designed around the collection of short stakeholder stories or micro-narratives. 'Narrative analysis in the human sciences refers to a family of approaches to diverse kinds of texts, which have in common a storied form' (Riessman, 1993, p. 1). 'Narratives are useful data because individuals often make sense of the world and their place in it through

narrative form. […] Through the events the narrative includes, excludes, and emphasizes, the storyteller not only illustrates his other version of the action but also provides an interpretation or evaluative commentary on the subject.' (Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004, p. 148). Narratives can be powerful as narrator does not simply recount an event or occurrence, as they remember it – they also tend to reflect on what is narrated, to give it meaning. "Narratives do not mirror, they refract the past. Imagination and strategic interests influence how storytellers choose to connect events and make them meaningful for others. Narratives are useful in research precisely because storytellers interpret the past rather than reproduce it as it was. The 'truths' of narrative accounts are not in their faithful representations of a past world, but in the shifting connections they forge among past, present, and future" (Riessman, 1993, p. 6).

Labov and Waletzky (1997) identify three broad types of narrative analysis. Some researchers may be interested in the actual events and experiences that are recounted in a narrative – in other words, they focus on the content of the narrative. The content of the narrative in turn includes two aspects: one is to describe past events, and the second is the evaluative function, making clear the meaning of those events and experiences in the lives of the participants. Other researchers may be more interested in the structure or form of the narrative, i.e. the way in which the story is put together. For others still, the interest may lie in the performance of narratives — the interactional and institutional contexts in which narratives are produced, recounted, and consumed (Elliott, 2005). In the 'Large Scale Listening' project, the emphasis was on the content of the text, "what" is said more than "how" it is said, the "told" rather than the "telling" (Riessman, 1993, p. 1).

Labov and Waletzky (1997) describe fully formed narratives as having six separate elements: the abstract (a summary of the subject of the narrative); the orientation (time, place, situation, participants); the complicating action (what actually happened); the evaluation (the meaning and significance of the action); the resolution (what finally happened); and lastly the coda, which returns the perspective to the present. 'It is the evaluation that conveys to an audience how they are to understand the meaning of the events that constitute the narrative, and simultaneously indicates what type of response is required. The evaluation should not be understood as simply provided by the narrator; rather the achievement of agreement on the evaluation of a narrative is the product of a process of negotiation. While the speaker is responsible for producing a narrative with an acceptable evaluation, the addressee or audience must collaborate by demonstrating that the evaluation has been understood'. (Elliott, 2005, p. 9). The evaluation emphasizes the point of the story and legitimates the act of narration as a social act (Elliott, 2005, p. 11). Because the evaluation provides an insight into how the narrator has chosen to interpret the events recounted, the evaluative elements of narratives can be of particular interest for sociologists (Elliott, 2005, p. 10).

At the core of the idea of narrative enquiry as a mode of understanding is 'its retrospective dimension, that is, the fact that narratives always and necessarily entail looking backward, from some present moment, and seeing in the movement of events episodes that are part of some larger whole' (Freeman, 2019, p. 27). While this retrospective aspect is most visible in big stories, Freeman argues that small stories (or micro-narratives), of the sort we find in conversational exchanges and the like are also useful for analysis. 'These stories are generally more inchoate and involve less synoptic constructing and configuring than big stories, but insofar as we can designate them as stories, which transpire in time and have something roughly akin to a beginning-middle-end structure, the retrospective dimension remains key' (Freeman, 2019, p. 27).

In this project, the micro-narrative is the 'meaning unit': the part of the data that even if standing out of the context, would communicate sufficient information to provide a piece of meaning to the reader. "Small stories" are 'the kinds of stories we tell in everyday settings (not just research or therapeutic interviews). These stories are most often about very mundane things and everyday occurrences' (Bamberg, 2012, p. 63). While small stories can lead to good insights, Elliott and Timulak (2005, p. 153) highlight that they also have limitations: 'generally, the longer the meaning unit is the bigger number (variety) of meanings it contains but the clearer its contextual meaning will be'.

This project collected stories from all stakeholders, including the beneficiaries of the Holiday Participation Centre: low-income groups. "Until recently, poor people's personal stories were perceived among policy makers and researchers mainly as anecdotal, as stories to be used when introducing an article or lecture, but not as a source of knowledge for the understanding of social climate and forces, and for setting policy. Most of the knowledge that is used to determine social policy is statistical, academic, 'objective' knowledge. This is particularly true concerning policies dealing with marginal populations, such as those receiving income security benefits" (Krumer-Nevo, 2005, p. 99). Low-income groups are routinely excluded from communication in the public sphere: "for many people, particularly those who lack social, political, or economic power, the community, neighborhood, or cultural narratives that are available are either negative, narrow, 'written' by others for them, or all of the above" (Rappaport, 1995, p. 796). 'In order to be considered legitimate deliberators, subjects must come to internalize the rules of the particular form of communication deemed to be the universally valid form of democratic engagement or be excluded from the public sphere' (Dahlberg, 2013, p. 27). Krumer-Nevo (2005, p. 100) adds that 'people living in poverty are often considered to possess only partial, incomplete and idiosyncratic knowledge, if any. As they tend to lack formal education, they are erroneously regarded as having less knowledge than their better-schooled peers. Moreover, their way of life is perceived as corroboration of this lack of knowledge, as well as ostensible evidence of poor learning and abstraction skills'. Rappaport (1995, p. 796) explicitly highlights that for excluded groups, sharing stories and being listened to can be an empowering experience, and a key aspect of narrative research: 'Understanding how community and organisational narratives are created and appropriate into our personal life stories (and vice versa) and how these stories influence identity and behavior, personal and social change, is one of the aims of narrative theory and research. Narrative theory is an approach to knowledge that opens new methods and ideas for those committed to the empowerment social agenda.'

Story ownership and interpretation

Freeman argues that there has been remarkable growth in narrative enquiry in the course of recent decades, highlighting that "in the eyes of some, the 'narrative turn' in the social sciences reflects nothing less than a paradigmatic shift in thinking about the human condition and how it is best explored" (Freeman, 2019, p. 21). In part this can be traced to the 'growing dissatisfaction with rigidly structured research interviews, which can artificially fragment individuals' experiences' (Elliott, 2005, p. 36).

The research methods literature traditionally puts most of the emphasis on the researcher in the interview process. Interviewers are purported to be 'instruments' in the research process, and the researcher is encouraged to build rapport and trust with the interview subject by being an attentive listener and by having a 'sympathetic understanding' of, and profound respect for, their thoughts, opinions and perspectives. It is an 'asymmetrical encounter established by the objectives of the researcher' (Hiller & DiLuzio, 2004, p. 6).

This asymmetry is not only reflected in how the conversation is structured, but also how the resulting data are interpreted. Qualitative methods, whether they are interview-based or narrative, are interpretivist methods. "Interpretivists assume that knowledge and meaning are acts of interpretation, hence there is no objective knowledge which is independent of thinking, reasoning humans. Interpretivism often addresses essential features of shared meaning and understanding (Gephart, 1999, 4). Traditionally, the researcher is the one who distills meaning: Interpretive analysis demands that we understand how the subjects of our research make sense of events and experiences and require dense, detailed, and contextualized description. This does not mean the respondent does not steer the data collection and interpretation: Elliott and Timulak (2005, p. 151) for example argue that 'qualitative interviews are distinguished by their deliberate giving of power to respondents, in the sense that they become co-researchers.

The question of interpretation is important in both the listening and the narrative analysis theories: it is a key component of the HURIER model, and underlies the evaluation concept in narratives. Both the listener/researcher and the narrator/respondent interpret and create meaning, but it is the researcher who holds the 'power of representation': the researcher is the final arbitrator. The 'Large Scale Listening' project aims to address this asymmetry by including the narrator/respondent explicitly in the analysis of the narratives. The project will be described in more detail in the following section.

The 'large scale listening' project

The Holiday Participation Centre (henceforth referred to as 'the Centre') is the social tourism division of Tourism Flanders, in Belgium. It was established in 2001 by the Flemish Government, with the goal to enable access to tourism for all. The main target group of the Centre are low-income residents. The Centre operates on the basis of a partnership model between social support organisations (e.g. public welfare organisations, not-for-profits) and social tourism and commercial tourism providers (e.g. accommodations, attractions, museums, theme parks, cultural organisations) - see Fig. 1. These providers offer targeted discounts to low-income residents, with the guarantee that the recipients of these discounts will be pre-screened and vouched for by the social support organisations, to ensure eligibility. The Centre connects both partners via its website, annual brochure and phone support service. In 2018, the Centre facilitated participation in day trips (87%), group (4%) and individual vacations (5%) and organized group tours (4%) for 166,779 adults and children (www.iedereenverdientvakantie.be). Fig. 1:

In 2017–2018, the Centre launched the 'Large Scale Listening' project, with the aim to explore how it could reach more beneficiaries, and improve its existing operations and processes. In the project, it combined the power of listening to stakeholders with the principles of appreciative inquiry and deep democracy. To do so, it employed SenseMaker, a research tool developed by Cognitive

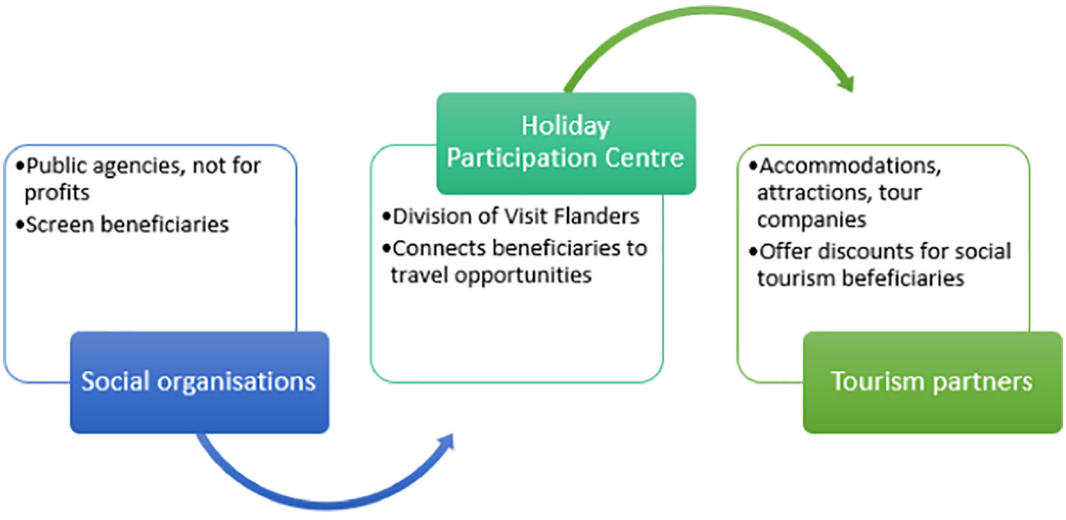

Fig. 1. Organisational structure.

Edge. The company was founded in 2005 by Dave Snowden with the objective of building methods, tools and capability to utilize insights from Complex Adaptive Systems theory and other scientific disciplines in social systems. SenseMaker is a software ecology which integrates decision support, research, monitoring and knowledge management (www.cognitive-edge.com). The method is based on the collection of 'micro-narratives': descriptions of experiences, anecdotes, moments. Respondents are encouraged to share these narratives in the way they would word them at work or to a neighbor. The goal is not to collect carefully structured narratives that argue a certain point –it is to collect fragments of experiences from a large number of respondents. The large number and varied perspectives of the narratives allow for identifying patterns within the themes or the respondent groups in questions. The idea is that the micro-narratives form a 'tapestry', and each fiber contributes to a more delicate pattern.

In this project, 1004 micro-narratives were collected to answer the question: 'how do we create a true Tourism for All?'. The narratives were solicited from four types of stakeholders: social tourism beneficiaries, social organisations, tourism organisations and supporters outside of the previous categories. A distinction is also made between respondents 'within' and 'outside of' the network'. The research aimed to extend the reach of the Centre and draw comparisons between social tourism work within and outside of the network, which meant that narratives were not only solicited from stakeholders who are formally affiliated with the Centre, but also from external supporters (public sector officials in non-tourism departments such as social services and innovation), social or tourism organisations who have expressed an interest in the Centre's work but have not formally joined the network, and potential beneficiaries who have not yet become registered users. These latter categories will be labelled 'outside of the network' in the analysis that follows.

There were two prompting questions for the research, deliberately phrased in an exploratory fashion, of which respondents were asked to choose one:

- Think of a moment or an experience in which you could or could not contribute to a holiday opportunity for someone else.
- Think of a moment or experience when a holiday could or could not be made possible for you or for your family.

A unique aspect of the SenseMaker method is that respondents are active participants in the interpretation of their own narrative. After the respondents told their micro-story, they completed set closed and open-ended questions. Some of the questions required respondents to tag their story with a theme, emotion or value in a multiple-choice format. Other questions invited respondents to map their interpretation in a linear (sliding scale) format, or on a triad (three values) or quadrant (four values).

While the SenseMaker tool offers new avenues for research interpretation, it also has limitations. As the 'codes' respondents assign to their stories are pre-set, the findings will be heavily influenced by the categories that were chosen outside of the participants' control. As opposed to traditional narrative analysis, this means the 'meaning units' do not emerge organically from the micro-stories, but need to be decided before the start of the project. The 22 follow up questions and tags/categories for this study were designed by a working committee with selected internal and external stakeholders in 2016, and were submitted for feedback to the Holiday Participation Centre's stakeholders at its annual meeting. The follow-up questions included:

- Multiple-choice questions, requiring respondents to associate their story with one or multiple 'tags'. Examples are:
  - The theme of the story (e.g. justice, challenge, belonging, confidence, happiness, poverty, exclusion, creating opportunity, other)
  - The feeling the story elicits (e.g. pride, joy, hope, indifference, angers, sadness, worry)
  - The frequency of the events being narrated occurring (very often to very rarely, on a five-point scale)
  - The respondent's evaluation of the situation being narrated (very positive to very negative, on a five-point scale)
- Triad questions, presented as a triangle with three values, requiring respondents to situate their story visually in relationship to these values. A 'not applicable' option was included for each question. Examples are:
  - The motivations of those who made the tourism experience happen: the three values were reputation, social engagement and additional revenue
  - The outcome of the story for those who participated in the tourism experience: the three values were belonging, confidence and friendship
  - The person or organisation that influenced the experience being narrated the most: the three values were individuals, social organisations and the government
- Sliding scale questions, requiring respondents to situate their story visually on a scale between two values. A 'not applicable' option was included for each question. Examples are:
  - The way people in the story feel, between alone and well-supported
  - The attitude of people in the story, between conservative and wanting change
  - The challenges in the story, between east and hard to overcome
- One quadrant question, requiring respondents to situate seven stakeholders in a quadrant with two axes. The seven stakeholders were: myself, my social organisation, the Holiday Participation Centre, the social support system, the tourism sector, the transportation sector, and the government. On the horizontal axis, respondents situated these stakeholders according to their *willingness* in supporting the experience narrated in the story. On the vertical axis, respondents situated these stakeholders according to their *ability* to support the experience narrated in the story. Respondents were asked to only select those stakeholders they felt were relevant in the narrative – they were not required to answer for all.

The respondents/narrators in this project were social tourism beneficiaries (40%), social organisations (27%), tourism

organisations (24%) and supporters outside of the previous categories (9%). 66% told a story about contributing to a holiday opportunity for someone else, and 34% about a holiday for themselves. 66% were stakeholders within the Holiday Participation Centre's direct network: these respondents are formally affiliated with the Centre, such as registered beneficiaries and partners in social and tourism organisations. 34% of the narratives came from respondents outside of the network.

The narratives were in part collected online (396 stories), and in part recorded by a group of 25 volunteers (608 stories), referred to as the 'listening ears' ('oren'). The Centre launched an online campaign on its website, and invited its stakeholders to submit their stories. The 'listening ears' responded to a call for volunteers within the network, and were trained in a dedicated two-day workshop. In this workshop, they were introduced to the project and the SenseMaker method, the principles of effective listening and the values of appreciative inquiry. Via role play, the 'listening ears' were encouraged to practice empathy in their listening and respect the personal dignity of each story teller. They were also given practical guidelines on how to make appointments with story tellers and record the stories in the online system. This training addressed the challenges in effective listening highlighted by Labov and Waletzky (1997), Elliott (2005) and Gwyn (2000) and aimed to make the volunteers adept in capturing detailed narratives: by introducing this method and training the volunteers, stories collected by the 'listening ears' usually were richer in detail than those collected online.

At the end of the workshop, they were asked to make appointments to collect their stories. Respondents were recruited via the Centre's mailing lists, at events and via snowball referrals. Between April and October 2017, they collected over 600 stories. Each 'listening ear' recorded the story (usually on a smartphone), and was provided with a booklet in which they wrote down the story word for word, and where they also noted the responses to the follow-up questions. The data were then entered into the online system (also used for online story submission) for aggregation. Further stories were collected in 'storytelling workshops' and at Centre's annual meeting. A Facebook group was set up to support the volunteers, and the Centre's staff made regular check-ins via phone. The 'listening ears' met in person halfway through the data collection period, and at the end of the project. They discussed the themes that emerged and proposed stories that reflected these themes the most powerfully – those stories will be presented in the findings section.

Findings

With over 1000 micro-narratives collected, this research project generated a wealth of findings. This paper will specifically focus on findings that highlight strengths in the network the Holiday Participation Center can build on, and weaknesses and challenges in the network it should be aware of, or should try to alleviate. It will also compare the narratives from those within the network to those outside of it. By identifying these 'strong links' and 'weak ties', the Centre aimed to strengthen the success of its mission to make holiday participation achievable for as many beneficiaries as possible.

In the first follow-up question, narrators were asked to tag their story with one or several themes: in this question, they could choose up to three. Fig. 2 highlights that 'creating opportunities' was the most commonly chosen theme, followed by 'belonging' and 'happiness'. Fig. 2:

The themes the narrators selected indicate that most stories relate to positive experiences. This is confirmed in the story evaluation question, where respondents were asked to assess their story on a five point scale from 'very positive' to 'very negative'. 84% of the stories were evaluated as either positive or very positive, 7% as neutral and 9% as negative or very negative. While the differences in ratings are small, social organisations were most likely to evaluate a story as negative, and least likely to evaluate it as very positive (see Fig. 3 below). Fig. 3:

Even with small differences in ratings, the orginisational listening framework allows for a deeper clarification of the findings. Where from a quantitative perspective the scores may seem too similar to cause concern, it emerged from the narrative responses of the social organisations that there was a challenge in the network. A reason for the finding that social organisations are more likely to evaluate their story as negative, is that many described challenges they faced in securing staff, funding and time to support beneficiaries. They mention squeezed budgets and resource limitations as a key reason:

> 'In the past, we used to organise four-day trips for adults with a disability. Those trips were heavenly. De atmosphere was so different from the day centre we operate. I remember a girl who made no social contact at all, and who completely blossomed on the holiday. Nowadays, all those trips are abolished. Too expensive, management says. The budgets are allocated differently. We need to refer our users to other organisations. Thinking about that makes me a little mad. Those holidays were so valuable.'[1]
>
> (Social organisation)

> "We have fewer staff than we used to. We have the Holiday Participation Centre's brochures in our reception area. Our clients look through them, but in the end it goes nowhere. People who are struggling often lack the drive needed to take action. If we don't support them, looking at the brochures is as far as it goes. But unfortunately we have less time than we did a few years ago."
>
> (Social organisation)

Faced with these challenges, social organisations were more critical in other follow up questions too: they were more likely than other respondent groups to tell a story where the beneficiary was perceived to have received insufficient help, or a story where the challenges were perceived to be hard to overcome. This potentially highlights a need for the Holiday Participation Centre to lobby for the value of its work with the Department of Employment and the Social Economy.

[1] All stories were translated from Dutch.

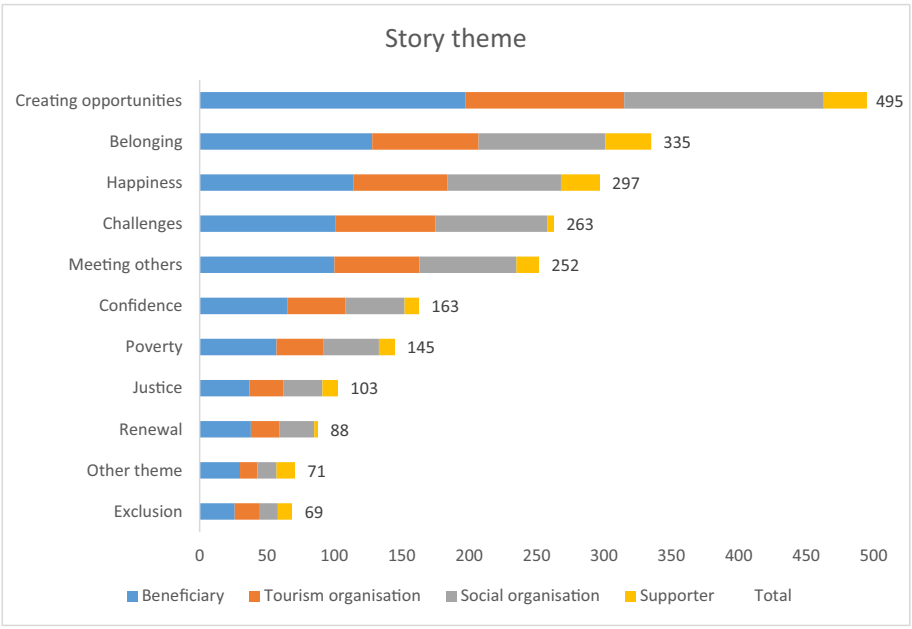

Fig. 2. Story theme.

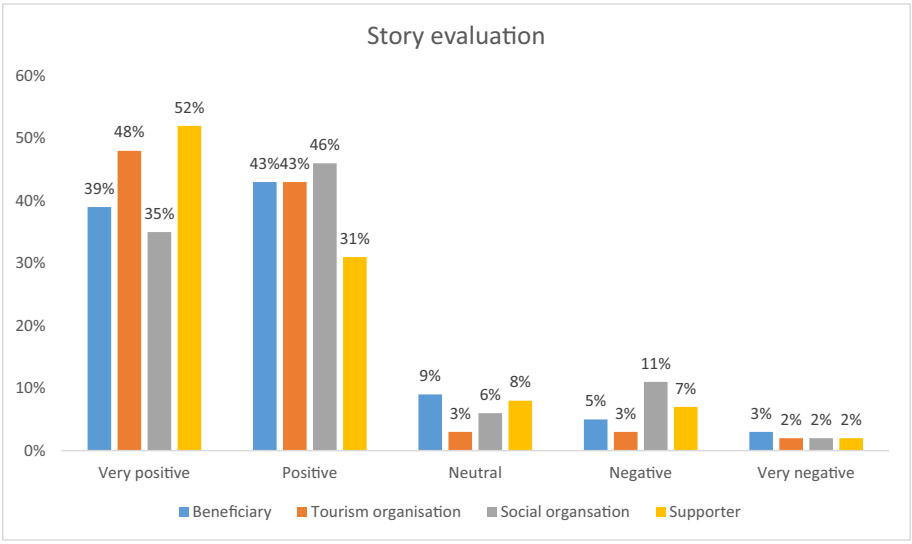

Fig. 3. Story evaluation.

However, many stories also highlight the strength of the network, and how the actions of an individual or organisation play a vital role in encouraging tourism participation for low-income groups. Those who are willing to provide the extra support or go the extra mile, can be the necessary link in overcoming the challenges faced:

> 'We should only provide information, and then the parents or the family should organise everything themselves. But this time I helped out. The little girl really wanted to come on holiday, but I could see a mile off that the parents would never get that organised. First, they didn't even want to discuss it, it's not so easy to have to admit that you can't get something done. The holiday took place in a location that was inaccessible by bus. They had no car, and a combination of the train and the bus was rather expensive. In the end I took the girl in my own time. That's actually not allowed, but I figured I choose what I do in my own free time.'
>
> (Tourism organisation)

> 'As family counselors, we have the opportunity to introduce families and children to the Holiday Participation Centre and its programmes. Some can't afford a holiday for the whole family, and choose to send the children to summer camp instead… but

often those are in locations that are not accessible by public transport, so that means the children can't go. I often drive children to their summer camp, even outside of my normal working hours. Not everyone is willing to do this, but I think it's a small effort to make when I see how happy it makes them. They come back all excited, you can tell it did them a world of good.'

(Social organisation)

It is here that the Holiday Participation Centre's influence and network is most highly valued. When asked, in the follow-up questions to the narrative, what narrators see as the main inhibitor to travel participation, 60% of respondents within the network pointed to affordability. Providing adequate support for beneficiaries was the second most common inhibitor, at 24%. The responses from those outside of the network were markedly different: they say adequate support as the most important inhibitor (33%), with affordability in second place (28%). This indicates that the Centre's network is effective in providing more support, and the challenge to tourism participation is more often reduced to the purely financial aspect. Outside of the network, where the influence of the Centre is not felt, a lack of support for beneficiaries may mean the actual planning stage may not take place, hence the affordability question is less relevant. The power of the social tourism network the Holiday Participation Centre provides was also visible in the responses of the tourism organisations. When asked to tag their story as an 'opportunity', a 'solution' or a 'challenge', 5% of respondents within the network chose to talk about a challenge. For tourism organisations outside of the network, this grew to 20%.

This however does not mean that there were no stories where the support challenge was overcome outside of the network. While these were a minority, 16 stories highlighted support mechanisms outside of the social organisations. In some cases, family members were able to offer help:

'I am a mum of two young children and earn an average income. Since my divorce, I have to manage on my own. I have started working on the weekends, so I don't have to deny my children and myself everything. Right after the divorce, I faced a lot of financial difficulties. After paying for the school supplies and the hobbies for the children, there was no money for anything fun. With my sister's support, I was able to take a holiday for a few days. Together with my sister I chose the Ardennes region, nice and quiet and in the heart of nature. It's not a very commercial area so there wouldn't be any unexpected expenses. I could cook our own meals in the rental accommodation. Thanks to my sister's help and the research she did, I was able to take a vacation. I couldn't do it by myself at that time, I had so many worries and I couldn't see the wood for the trees any more. After that short break I was able to breathe again, and I found the strength to keep going.'

(Beneficiary)

This story exemplifies that beneficiaries within the network indicate more often that their holiday was made possible by a social organisation, whereas beneficiaries outside of the network referred more often to the social engagement of a specific individual. Because these beneficiaries are outside of the network, they miss out on social support mechanisms and organisations that might have been able to help them. These beneficiaries do not benefit from the strength of the network, pointing to the need for broader awareness building of the Holiday Support Centre among low-income groups (see Fig. 4). Fig. 4:

Narrators were asked in the follow-up questions how they see a holiday: as a right, necessity, reward, luxury, matter of course or other. 30% of respondents indicated they see participation in tourism as a right (see Fig. 5). Fig. 5:

Once again, differences can be observed between different stakeholder groups in this question. Tourism participation was seen as right most often by social organisations (46%) and tourism organisations (37%) Supporters were most likely to see it as a necessity (31%), whereas the most common answer for beneficiaries was reward (28%), followed by luxury (23%) (see Fig. 6). Fig. 6:

The beneficiaries' micro-narratives often indicated a sense of shame and guilt – this could explain why for many, a holiday is seen as a reward or luxury, and not a right. Examples of stories that express this sentiment are:

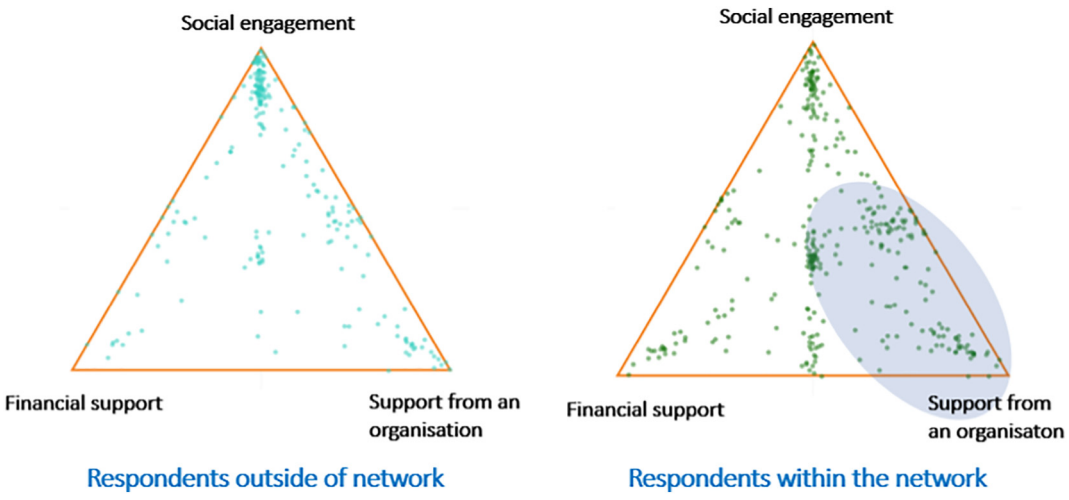

Fig. 4. Enabling factor in story.

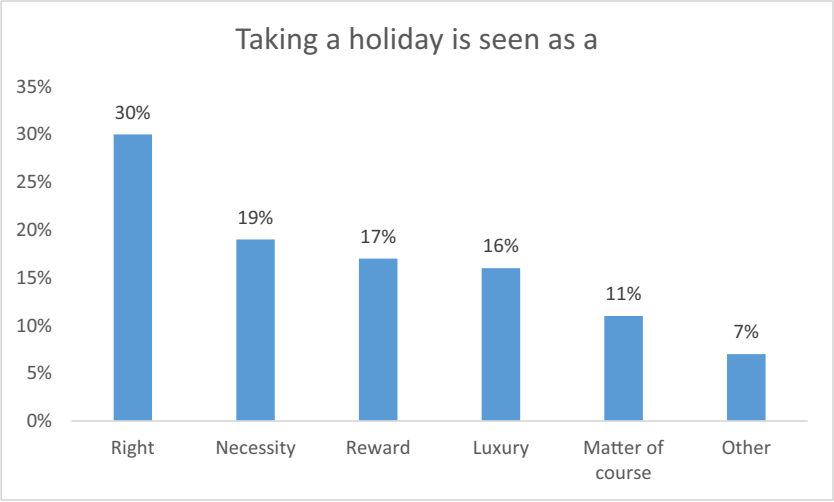

Fig. 5. Holiday evaluation.

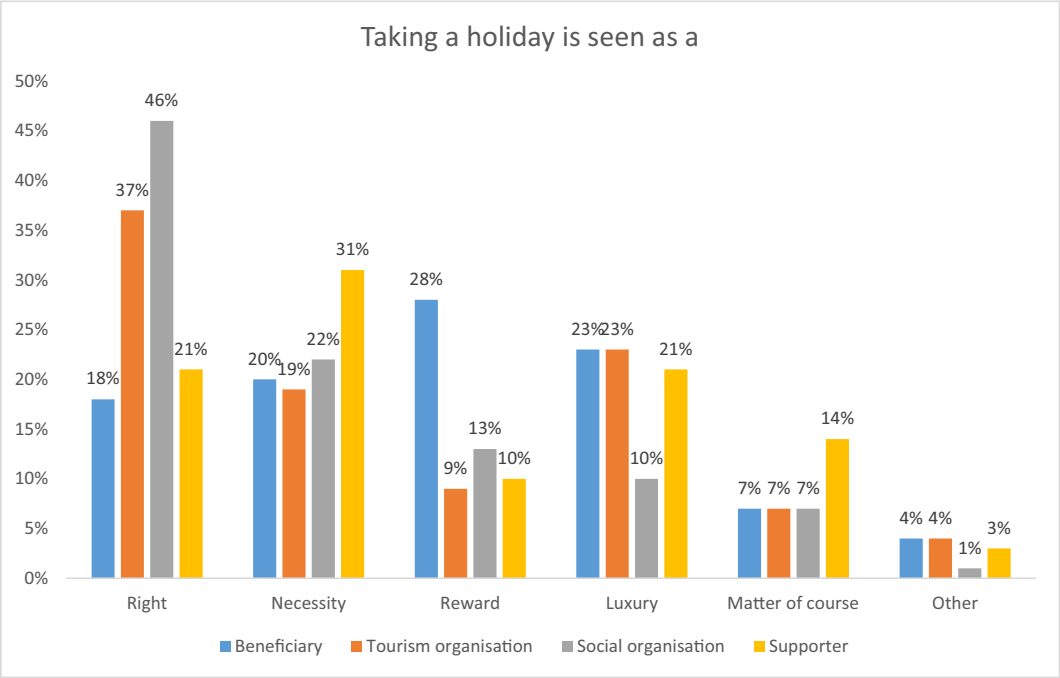

Fig. 6. Holiday evaluation by respondent group.

"After my divorce, I ended up living in poverty. I was convinced it was my own fault. I struggled with that for a long time. When I got back on my feet, I felt like taking a holiday. On the day of departure everything went well. I met a nice person on the train and arrived at the hotel without any problems. But then I experienced strong feelings of guilt. Did I have a right to this holiday? Did I deserve it? I felt very inferior again and stayed in my room. The remaining days I just 'survived' in a type of blur. I stayed in my room the whole time, apart from meal times, when I would hide in a corner. Since then I don't dare to consider it any more. The organisation where I volunteer has asked me to join them on a trip, on a weekend or a holiday. But I am not up for it. I am too scared to fail again."

(Beneficiary)

'It took me 4 years before I was able to socialize again. I avoided all social contact out of shame. Because of the staff at my social organization, I dared to accept that I had the right to a holiday. It started with small moments of relaxation – I didn't even dare to read a book any more. There were a large number of barriers.'

(Beneficiary)

This rich finding highlights another potential action point for the Holiday Participation Centre, in the form of targeted outreach initiatives to people who are eligible for social tourism intervention, but whose feelings of shame and guilt prevent them from participating. Through organisational listening, the Centre discovered a 'weak tie': a gap in its beneficiary stakeholder group that should be addressed for it to fully deliver on its mission to make tourism participation possible for all.

Conclusion

Social tourism organisations, while they differ widely in their structure, scope and operational model, share a key characteristic: their stakeholder network is diverse, and unique in the tourism sector. By their nature, their focus is on tourists who, without their existence, would be unlikely to participate in travel. In addition, many have close relationships with social organisations in the public and voluntary sector, for whom tourism is unlikely to be the main focus. A diverse network of this kind offers great opportunity: it has the power to create new connections, offer innovative solutions to challenges, and provide mutual support. However, diverse networks also come with challenges: stakeholders need to be effectively engaged, and the objectives, circumstances and resource limitations of each stakeholder group need to be taken into account. With the 'Large Scale Listening' project, the Holiday Participation Centre aimed to understand its stakeholder network better, so that it could build on its strengths and address its weaknesses. It also aimed to compare narratives within and outside of its network, by engaging public sector 'supporters' and individuals and groups with whom it has weaker ties.

The project placed the principles of organisational listening at the very heart of its implementation. This was a time-consuming and resource-intensive process, in which the Centre relinquished a lot of control to the respondents: they freely chose the story they wanted to tell, and played an active part in its interpretation, emphasising their story ownership. Applying Brownell's (2015) HURIER model, the Centre evaluated the narratives and themes so that it could formulate targeted responses.

This narrative research project generated a wealth of findings that were grouped into different themes. Examples of these themes are: the motivations for stakeholders to partner with the Holiday Participation Centre; the small acts of kindness of individuals that make all the difference in delivering a memorable tourism experience; the impact of tourism participation on children; feelings of shame and inferiority that inhibit potential beneficiaries from participating in social tourism; and the importance of the social tourism network in generating a sense of belonging. To discuss each theme in detail is outside of the scope of this paper, which has instead focused on highlighting the strong ties that exist in the network and make the Centre thrive, and the weaker links the Centre can attempt to support.

Social organisations emerged in this project as a vital, but somewhat embattled link in the social tourism chain. Their support of the beneficiaries is a key enabler to tourism participation, whether they are within or outside of the Centre's network. Faced with limited resources and heightened time pressures, they are most likely to use their story to highlight what could have been done better, or in some cases, what was possible in the past under different circumstances. As a respondent group, social organisations are also most likely to perceive tourism participation as a right. Combined, these findings point to a high level of motivation to help, and frustration that at times more support is impossible to provide. This finding will support the Centre in its lobbying effort to achieve greater recognition for the value of its mission.

The project also highlights the power of the network the Holiday Participation Centre has built. Social tourism organisations in the network are less likely to see the provision of support as an inhibitor for travel, compared to those outside of the network. In other words, while they wish they could do more and that they had more resources, they are confident they have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide support, and the financial position of the beneficiary makes affordability a more pressing inhibitor. Tourism organisations within the network are less likely to focus their story on the affordability challenge than those outside of the network. This points to the important role of the Centre in providing support and building capacity among its stakeholders: a strength it should nurture and leverage going forward.

Finally, the study showed that the beneficiaries of social tourism are more likely to perceive their participation in tourism as a reward or a luxury, whereas social organisations and tourism organisations are more likely to perceive it as a right. Feelings of shame and guilt often drive the beneficiaries' responses. Being aware that other stakeholders in the network do not share their self-perception, and are often advocates of the right to tourism, may have an empowering effect on the beneficiaries – this is another action point the Centre should implement, as it can expand and strengthen its beneficiary group.

In brief, while the narrators in this study were asked to tell a story about a common theme, and often express the same support of social tourism, that does not mean that their perspectives on where the Centre should focus its efforts do not differ. It is in the exploration of these differences that the value of listening is most keenly felt, as Stivers (1994, p. 367) argues: 'The advantage of listening as a practice of responsiveness is that it asks administrators not to try to turn themselves into superpeople but simply to try some rather humble tactics and work on developing fairly modest but significant capacities. Because it promotes openness, respect for difference, and reciprocity, the practice of skillful listening can help administrators evolve toward a form of responsiveness that supports both democratic accountability and administrative effectiveness'. By understanding different perspectives, the Centre will be able to enhance its approach and communications towards distinct stakeholder groups, and to address potential pain points in the network.

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