RESEARCH ARTICLE

Knowledge co-creation: The role of tourism consultants

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ABSTRACT

Within the field of development aid, there is evidence of a shift in the knowledge exchange process where consultants are transitioning from unidirectional knowledge transfer approaches to more interactive methods based on co-creation. However, there is limited discussion in the tourism literature about the nature of this shift and how it is impacting on tourism for development in practice. This paper reports on a qualitative study with 17 tourism consultants that sought to understand their roles and approaches towards the creation, development and exchange of knowledge with communities in developing countries. It was found that most consultants still adopt the role of expert disseminator of knowledge; evidence of co-creation approaches in consultancy practices was far less common.

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Introduction

Tourism has long been recognised as a crucial growth sector for developing and emerging economies (UNWTO et al., 2017); however, a problem that consistently hinders the tourism sector in such countries is a lack of local knowledge about tourism and its development. Many local communities do not have the required local capacity to fully leverage economic value from their tourism resources while also managing the sector so that it develops in a sustainable way (Telfer & Sharpley, 2016; UNWTO et al., 2017). In many cases, donors and development agencies have intervened and attempted to support tourism development through the provision of specialist knowledge which is provided by all manner of technical experts, such as consultants, advisors, teachers and administrators (Zielinski et al., 2018). Indeed, some have estimated that at least a quarter of donor budgets are spent on consultancy, research and training (Greenhill, 2006).

Consultants generally possess some particular knowledge or technical expertise, are external to an organisation and engaged for a fee on a temporary basis (Tordoir, 2012), with consulting defined as the process of transferring "expertise, knowledge and/or skills from one party to another" (Xiao et al., 2017). In the development context, consultants are employed, for example, to: produce and impart knowledge about the interventions being funded; serve as external knowledge stock; and/or facilitate knowledge transfer between project stakeholders, such as between researchers, decision makers, clients and/or beneficiaries (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013; Wang et al., 2007). In doing so, they are increasingly recognised as playing an important role in supporting and providing knowledge for development, and so have become integral players in development aid (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013).

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The involvement of such experts is based on assumptions regarding the transferability of knowledge to aid recipients (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013). Yet, while the supply of consultants to developing countries can certainly provide much-needed expertise and experience, the practice has also been widely criticised and referred to as 'perhaps the most controversial type of aid' (OECD, 2012; Staicu & Barbulescu, 2017, p. 140). As such, there is currently a great deal of cynicism about the role such experts play in development and criticisms have been levelled at a perceived failure to contribute to the development of local skills and knowledge (Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019; OECD, 2012).

In tourism, the role of consultants and other technical experts is largely unexplored (Feighery, 2011; Saito et al., 2018; Simpson & Roberts, 2000; Xiao et al., 2017). Those studies undertaken to date however, have found that tourism consultants will undertake a variety of roles including planners, mediators, interventionists, and facilitators, usually with the objective of facilitating or managing particular tourism development initiatives and projects (Saito et al., 2018). Literature exploring the knowledge roles of consultants in tourism for development is much more limited, however, it is claimed that the knowledge approaches taken by consultants is one that advocates technical knowledge provision and transfer (Font et al., 2014), where the focus is on, for example, providing technical knowledge and expertise, and knowledge gathering and dissemination.

Arguably, such an approach where knowledge transfer is the goal suggests a superiority of Western scientific knowledge (Koch & Weingart, 2016), and potentially positions consultants and other technical experts as 'saviours' (Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019), brought into communities for a short amount of time to impose foreign-designed solutions to local problems. Yet there are many examples where the local people have not acquired, nor developed the requisite knowledge and skills to be able to continue a tourism development project once the experts have departed (Dodds et al., 2018; Font et al., 2014; Lenao, 2015; Scheyvens, 2009; Stone, 2015; Tolkach et al., 2012). Perhaps then, it is time to reconsider our approach, including the ways in which knowledge is generated, exchanged and used, as well the role of technical experts, such as consultants, in those knowledge processes.

In the broader field of development aid there has, over the last decade, been a shift in understanding the knowledge exchange process, with 'co-creation' replacing the more traditional 'transfer' approach to knowledge for development (Morais et al., 2016; Voorberg et al., 2015; Wengel et al., 2019). In tourism, we are also starting to see a similar shift (for example: Morais et al. Oesterle et al., 2016; Van Niekerk et al., 2017; Wengel et al., 2019). This shift has seen our understanding of the knowledge exchange process move beyond being defined simply in terms of transfer where the goal is the movement of knowledge from knowledge source to potential users (Ko et al., 2005; Lahti & Beyerlein, 2000; Van Niekerk et al., 2017). Instead, with co-creation, we are seeing a greater emphasis on the collaborative and iterative nature of knowledge generation, including the dynamic processes by which it is co-created and exchanged (Van Niekerk et al., 2017), as well as a greater emphasis on local knowledge (Koch & Weingart, 2016). The approach also calls for consultants to be positioned as facilitators and co-creators (Wengel et al., 2019) rather than 'lone experts' (Cockburn-Wootten, McIntosh, Smith, & Jeffries, 2018, p. 1484) engaged in top-down, unidirectional communication.

This paper reports on a qualitative study that sought to empirically understand the role of consultants in their tourism for development work in developing countries. It is acknowledged that consultants may undertake a range of knowledge-based roles during a consultancy project, from knowledge or subject expert, to advocate, educator, researcher, technician, advisor, bridge-builder, storyteller, or applied theoretician (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013; Jacobsen et al., 2005; Kitay & Wright, 2003); however, the aim of the research was to identify the key knowledge approaches taken by the consultants, as well as their attitudes towards the ways knowledge is developed and exchanged. Does knowledge transfer continue to be the desired results of such consultancies or are we seeing a shift in the ways consultants approach knowledge for development? While theoretical discussions about knowledge in tourism are starting to advocate the use of more collaborative knowledge approaches for tourism development, such as knowledge co-creation, what are we witnessing in practice? And, in theorising knowledge for development, what can we learn from those consultants who are using knowledge co-creation in practice?

Knowledge, co-creation, and consultants

Co-creation has become a widely used term to describe a shift in thinking from the organisation as a definer of value, to a more participative process where people and organisations together generate and develop meaning and value (Ind & Coates, 2013). Originally developed in the business and economics fields to describe the practice of "developing systems, products or services through collaboration with customers, managers, employees, and other company stakeholders" (Ramaswamy & Gouillart, 2010, p. 4), the idea of co-creation has moved beyond this managerially dominated focus on the often vague idea of value (Ind & Coates, 2013). It is now seen to have a wider focus on interaction for collaborative knowledge generation and the development of new opportunities (Wengel et al., 2019). Related to concepts such as public participation, collaborative governance or community involvement, co-creation requires the *active* involvement of end users in the production process – and this involvement is more specific than, for instance, the broad concept of participation, which could also refer to passive involvement (Voorberg et al., 2015). Co-creation thus comes from a position of equality rather than dominance. Instead of a person or group having power or dominance over another, co-creation incorporates the conception of power-with, a jointly developed, co-active power which is a force for participation and democratisation and which creates meaning for all (Ind & Coates, 2013).

Although co-creation is still often seen from a managerial perspective, it is increasing in prevalence in the psychology, education, planning and development literatures (Wengel et al., 2019) where nuances in terminology are developing to reflect context. From a development perspective, rather than being defined as a participatory process between producers and consumers, co-creation is seen as a creative process inclusive of stakeholders across a value chain. It is seen as a way to tap into the collective intelligence of a group and a process of collective visioning and problem solving (Rill & Hämäläinen, 2018). From a knowledge

perspective (that is, the co-creation of knowledge), the literature largely focuses on how co-creation can be used as a method to align research with an understanding and engagement with end users (Greenhalgh et al., 2016). From this perspective, co-creation describes a shift in thinking that challenges traditional considerations around the concept of expertise and participation, including such questions of who can know and make decisions in a project (Ind & Coates, 2013; Wengel et al., 2019). As a method, co-creation focuses on civic engagement, shared decision-making, power sharing, intersectional collaboration, processes and relationships (Wengel et al., 2019); and postulates end user involvement and researcher-end user collaboration as means to co-produce knowledge and increase implementation of resultant research outcomes (Lillehagen, 2017).

Literature on the use of co-creation in consultancy is limited and has been largely undertaken from a management consulting perspective with a focus on value co-creation, that is, how value is created through the social interactions between consultants and clients (for example: Chih & Zwikael, 2015; Kantanen, 2017; Oesterle et al., 2016, 2019; Von Becker et al., 2015). In relation to the definition and roles of consultants, this literature shows how consultancy from a co-creation lens differs from traditional concepts. For example, while traditional definitions of consulting include elements such as advisory activity, intentional intervention from outside, deliberate changes, and transferability of expert knowledge from consultant to client (Kantanen, 2017), a co-creation perspective defines consultancy in such terms as knowledge sharing, dialogic interaction, equity, and collaboration quality (Kantanen, 2017; Oesterle et al., 2019).

Knowledge sharing in this context is understood in terms of bi-directional (or multi-directional) knowledge exchange, as opposed to the uni-directional exchange often implied in knowledge transfer. When knowledge exchange is viewed in terms of bi- (or multi-) directionality, then one expectation of that exchange is that both (or all) parties will collaboratively learn from the process and the resultant knowledge system built between 'experts' and 'users' is more likely to produce sustainable outcomes (Roux et al., 2006). Dialogic interaction entails interactivity, deep engagement, mutuality, a willingness to act from both sides and dialogue in which all participants can have a mutually constructive exchange that leads to the intersubjective creation of meaning (Kantanen, 2017; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004). Equity encompasses mutuality, openness, non-command relationships, and a sense of ownership of the process; and is characterised by shared control and a facilitative environment (Kantanen, 2017). Collaboration quality refers to the extent to which at least two entities (such as consultant and client) work jointly and coordinate together, including aspects such as courtesy, respect, friendliness, and mutual trustworthiness of the participants (Oesterle et al., 2019).

In the development aid and tourism for development literature, co-creation in consultancy is largely unexplored and only beginning to become part of development aid terminology (e.g. Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019; Koch & Weingart, 2016). While consultants are recognised as performing a range of knowledge roles (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013; Lewis & Mosse, 2006; Mosse, 2011; Wilson, 2007), those roles that reflect a more prescriptive, 'consultant as expert' approach have been criticised for an inability to contribute towards sustainable capacity-building, a lack of reflective practice, and for perpetuating oppressive power structures (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013; Easterly, 2013; Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019; Koch & Weingart, 2016; OECD, 2012). As such, there has been a move, at least in part, towards advocating for the use of more collaborative and reflective styles of consulting where the terms of reference of a development initiative are defined by the beneficiaries (end users) rather than by the consultants or the donor organisations (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013; Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019; Koch & Weingart, 2016).

Study methods

A qualitative methodology guided by a constructivist epistemology was adopted to address the study objectives. To explore the role of consultants in the knowledge generation processes that occur in tourism development projects in developing countries, it was important to engage in in-depth conversations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Kvale, 1996) with the consultants themselves and that they could speak openly about their experiences. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were adopted to enable the researchers to engage in conversations with 17 experienced tourism consultants about their consulting roles in tourism development projects. The semi-structured nature of the interviews enabled the researchers to address specific issues; however, the interviews also remained within the genre of a conversation. As such, interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 min with the average just over 40 min. Due to the diverse locations of respondents, interviews were conducted by online video conferencing (such as Skype) or by telephone. All interviews were conducted by a member of the research team.

In conducting the interviews, the researchers purposely did not ask direct questions using knowledge exchange terminology, such as knowledge transfer or knowledge co-creation. Instead, the consultants were asked general questions about the projects in which they had been involved, how they described their consultancy roles, if and how local involvement occurred, which factors they believed to be integral for success in development projects; and the reasons why a consultancy relationship might lead to negative outcomes for the project or community. This was done to eliminate potential bias in the respondents' answers and ensure they spoke freely about their roles without reverting to rhetoric or feeling like they had to emphasise any particular knowledge approach. It was also important to keep discussions about their roles and attitudes general in nature to therefore be able to develop a more realistic and candid picture of the ways that consultants are using knowledge in practice.

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed by a member of the research team. Member checking was employed so that the participants could review their interview transcript. Transcripts were qualitatively analysed using open, and then manifest and latent coding techniques by two members of the research team. That is, the researchers analysed the data to identify specific words and/or phrases, as well as the meanings implied through the communications (Smith, 2010). This occurred through an iterative process of reading and analysing the transcripts as a whole and then categorising the emergent themes through a thematic

framework informed by the literature. Of interest in this analysis was how the consultants described their roles – that is, was it more from the perspective of 'technical expert' or was it more from a 'co-creation' perspective; as well as how the consultants perceived and described community involvement – for example did they see or define involvement from a 'top down' perspective where community's involvement in tourism development was defined by the tourism development, or did they see it more from a collaborative or partnership perspective where the community drives the development.

Consultants who had undertaken tourism development projects in developing countries were sought as participants in the study. For this study, sampling was based on a participant having undertaken one or more projects in a developing country. Participants were identified through a form of snowball sampling using informal network connections (Jennings, 2010), stemming from the connections established through conversations with, and the networks of, the first consultant interviewed. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation had been reached. Table 1 provides a summary of the consultancy backgrounds and experience of the participants. On average the participants had just over 17 years' experience as tourism consultants and cumulatively had worked in 39 different developing countries. Vietnam, followed by Vanuatu, Fiji, and Cambodia were the most frequently cited developing countries in which the participants had consulted. The prevalence of consultancy projects undertaken in South East Asian and Pacific Island nations can be attributed to the fact that the researchers are Australian-based, and a snowball sampling technique was used to identify participants. The participants surveyed in the study were predominantly Australian or from Oceania and Southeast Asian countries; as such, a limitation of the study is that there is some degree of homogeneity in the sample. Further, the regional focus and qualitative methodology does mean that the results are not generalisable to all developing country contexts.

Results and discussion

Collectively, the participants had been engaged in a number of roles in the tourism for development projects in which they had been involved, including technical advisor, team leader, project evaluator, intermediary, representative (of a particular organisation), facilitator, workshop instructor, and educator or trainer. The Asian Development Bank (6), AusAid (5) and The World Bank (4) were frequently mentioned agencies with which the respondents had consulting experience. Other agencies cited by respondents included: The International Finance Corporation (IMF), Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), International Finance Corporation (IFC), SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV NDO), The World Trade Centre, The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and The International Union Conservation of Nature (IUCN). They had generally been involved in the planning, development or implementation of 'tourism development plans' (including tourism master plans, national tourism development plans, or regional tourism development plans).

From a knowledge perspective, there were a range of knowledge roles the consultants performed to facilitate the building of local capacity and knowledge needed for local communities to become involved in tourism. These ranged from expert, where their role was to transfer their knowledge by 'teaching' or 'educating' locals; to knowledge representative, where they were employed to use their expert knowledge to represent the views of one particular party (such as the government, the private sector or foreign investors) in any negotiations regarding tourism planning; to knowledge intermediary, where they worked on developing relationships amongst stakeholders and facilitating the sharing of knowledge between these groups; to knowledge

Table 1
Consultancy background and experience of the participants in developing countries.

Consultant	Years employed as a tourism consultant	Number of projects undertaken in the tourism consultant capacity in a developing country	Number of countries in which consultancy work had been performed	Types of agencies for which tourism consultancy work has been performed			Academic background or experience
				Multi- or bilateral donor agencies	Government	NGOs	
C1	30	u	30	x	x	x	x
C2	25	>100	10	x	x	x	
C3	20	5	2		x	x	x
C4	18	u	12	x	x	x	
C5	10	4	1		x		
C6	4	1	1		x		x
C7	9	4	1	x	x		
C8	15	1	1			x	
C9	27	>100	30	x	x	x	
C10	13	10	10	x	x	x	x
C11	35	u	6	x	x		x
C12	16	>100	15	x	x	x	
C13	10	3	3	x	x		
C14	15	2	2	x	x	x	x
C15	15	30	9	x	x	x	
C16	11	10	1	x	x	x	
C17	20	>100	8	x	x		x

co-creators, where they worked in collaboration with local stakeholders to jointly plan a tourism development project and develop the knowledge needed to then implement and continue that project into the future.

Community participation and capacity building

Where the projects were smaller in scale, focusing on tourism for development in a specific village, town or region, community participation and local capacity development were clearly strong objectives of development projects. Fifteen of the consultants held the position that community involvement is not only essential but should be one of the main elements driving tourism development. Eleven of the consultants also mentioned that in tourism for development initiatives, funding agencies often have specific requirements and expectations in relation to community engagement and/or local capacity development. Indeed, in describing their roles, all of the participants discussed the diversity and acknowledged that their consultancy approach was usually dictated by the project funder's requirements and the size of the project. As observed by one of the consultants:

There has been a definite shift, a decentralisation. A lot of projects, maybe ten years ago, were centralised in control where an international consultant or the central government would say, 'we're doing this project'. From the consultant's perspective, a lot of projects were just technical, providing assistance. The consultant would come in, do whatever their jobs was and leave. But now a lot of the projects I see coming through now have 'decentralised' in that they [the donor organisations] are wanting to empower the local community. Now on projects there's a partnership with the local people. (C13).

This, however, is hardly a revelation – programs today are designed with a heavy emphasis on consultation and participation (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013; Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019), with community participation and local capacity development firmly established in development aid rhetoric.

Despite this shift towards a greater emphasis on community participation, there is still evidence that some strategies being used by donor organisations and aid agencies to garner genuine local participation are questionable. As observed by one consultant, "they [the donor organisations] say to try to involve in the local community by using a participatory approach – which is the fashionable approach at the moment. But if the local people are just sitting there but not actually participating, this is tokenism right? Just ticking the [community involvement] boxes" (C16). Indeed, as recognised by several of the consultants, ensuring genuine local involvement in tourism for development requires more than simply "checking off a box that says, community consultations" (C15) or employing a few locals because "that's what the project rules say" (C5). When there is a lack of meaningful input from affected communities, as well as little genuine understanding of the end user, the results are development projects that neglect the needs of the people they are designed for, poor program design, and potentially unsustainable outcomes (Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2014; Koch & Weingart, 2016).

In discussing their consultancy approach, many of the consultants believed that they had adopted a more genuine approach to community participation than what was required by the donor organisations consultancy terms. Eleven of the consultants spoke at length about actively including local communities in the planning and development process and the strategies they used to ensure this process was community driven. Yet, while these consultants discussed the importance of involving locals and indeed perceived their approach to be 'community-driven' – especially if the local communities were involved in tourism development initiative from the beginning – often this participation was described in language that revealed it was passive in nature. Although community was indeed 'consulted', the consultation process and resultant plans for the tourism development initiative were established from the perspective of the consultant's lexicon and framing of knowledge.

In many cases, community involvement simply encompassed making plans *about* local communities and their involvement rather than *with* the community, gaining community support for a project, and/or informing local communities about the project. For example, one consultant described the process of involving the community as asking a series of questions *about* the local community and their involvement during the development phase of the project, such as, "How can they engage and contribute to the tourism sector? How will they benefit and what do they need to release these benefits?" (C15). Another described community involvement as getting community agreement for the project: "We go into the village and sit with the people and speak their language. Talk through the project and get their 'buy in' from the beginning" (C13); while another described it in terms of building community awareness: "local community should be involved in the beginning of the stage as early as possible so at least they can aware of what is going to happen" (C16).

Approaches to knowledge

From a knowledge perspective, such examples show that even within a consultancy setting that is based around community involvement, the focus of the consultant is on the delivery of a knowledge product (such as a development plan blueprint, or the development initiative in its entirety) from a position of dominance rather than equality. In such cases, the 'problem' is identified and analysed by the consultants or other experts, a solution devised (usually with a degree of participatory input), and a plan is then executed (generally by the consultants, and sometimes with the help of a select few local people). Although the solutions identified by the consultants are usually derived from some form of community participatory initiative, local voices are not truly part of devising those solutions; and throughout the implementation of a project, consultants work more in a directive manner rather than in a way that is reflective, participatory, and responsive to local knowledge systems.

The problem with such an approach is the 'solutions' devised by consultants and other experts are often only partly reflective of the needs and wants of intended end users. In addition, when expert-generated solutions become a blueprint for the implementation of an intervention or project with little room for reflexivity, learning or iteration over the next few years of

implementation, then an unintended consequence of such rigid program design is an inability for the experts involved to incorporate lessons learnt (Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019). Further it contributes to an inability for the community themselves to learn any lessons from the process. As acknowledged by eight of the consultants interviewed, despite the money that continues to be spent by donor organisations on tourism for development projects and the requirement that these projects include provisions for 'community engagement' and 'capacity building', too many projects still fail. Project failures are of course not solely the result of a lack of engagement and other studies have identified challenges to include lack of perceived skills to contribute to such processes, lack of time and resources to participate, as well as poor governance systems and organisation limiting exposure to such processes (Mutinda Ndivo & Cantoni, 2016). Participants in this study similarly noted; "local interest in wanting to be involved. Some of them might not want to be involved in tourism" (C1).

The approaches most commonly described by the consultants were those which situated them as 'experts', employed to transfer their knowledge to local communities. Four of the consultants spoke entirely from an expert perspective, describing their role in terms of transferring knowledge and expertise, as well as producing knowledge, for example by "developing products that the local people would benefit from" (C10); two described their practice in terms of a community-based approach where they were the expert who led the community consultation process; and five used language which largely reflected the view that a consultant's main role is to transfer their knowledge to the local community, however this was done through the use of strategies that garnered community participation and involvement in the expert-designed project.

Knowledge co-creation

In advocating for a different approach, the interviews with the remaining six consultants are of interest. These participants were also some of the most experienced consultants in terms of the number of years they had worked as a consultant (Table 1). The language used by these consultants was different to their peers. Each spoke at length about the process of tourism for development as being a joint venture between consultants and local communities, viewing themselves as facilitators and co-creators, rather than as 'experts' engaged in top-down transfer and unidirectional communication – indeed, this language was indicative of a knowledge co-creation approach. Each took the view that rather than transferring 'expert knowledge' about a project and its development, a consultant's role is to work with local people and communities to together generate the knowledge needed to develop tourism initiatives.

> I say to them, "I'm going to go home. I'm going to come here and I'm going to talk with you, work with you and try and help you as best I can, but I'm going to go home. You have got to do it." To me starting with that point of view - and let me assure you, they get shocked by that because they think I've got all the answers and I say, "Well, I don't have all the answers. You've got to put it into your context."
>
> [(C17)]

> You are not trying to tell them what you want to happen; you are trying to find out what they want to happen. I might have the number of ideas of what they could do but rather than me saying, "this is what you should do", I will try to get them discover things for themselves.
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> [(C11)]

As reflected in the vignettes, these consultants see themselves as part of the process of constructing knowledge and not as deliverers of knowledge. As a knowledge co-creator, the consultant merely facilitates the design process and provides a platform to input that which is not automatically rooted in the local power structures (Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019; Voorberg et al., 2015), thus ensuring the end users are *actively* involved in the production or development process, as well as the implementation phase. Ideas that emerge should therefore be community-generated, with the development, testing and implementation of those ideas furthered through the guidance of expert (consultant) knowledge. As articulated by Morais et al. (2016), the knowledge co-creation process is a joint venture between experts, local partners and microentrepreneurs in developing and pursuing a shared horizon. This common horizon is the meaningful involvement in tourism by local participants and communities.

In describing their knowledge role in terms of co-creation rather than transfer, the six consultants also described themselves as partners to the community rather than experts; and as such, acknowledged that they were therefore 'learners' in the process.

> Just listening to other people, listening to what their local ways and learning how you can help them by fitting in with their ways. Listen to people first, and learning how they do things, and then trying to help.
>
> [(C8)]

> Often what the consultant needs to do is hear the local context, learn from their experience and then feedback what's close to being culturally appropriate. That's an important thing in working in developing countries. It's learning about, understanding the cultural perspective and norms. That's not easy.
>
> [(C17)]

One of the criticisms that has been directed at consultants and other experts working in development aid, is that they often have little knowledge of conditions on the ground (Borda-Rodriguez & Johnson, 2013; Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2014, 2019).

Indeed, some of the participants in this study were critical of this. As one consultant noted; "tourism consultants fly out in two days. How can you know the problems? How can you understand what is happening when you come? You have to spend more time" (C8). Participants in this study talked of this disconnect; where consultants see themselves as the 'expert', it is questionable as to whether they will have the motivation to deeply immerse themselves and develop real empathy for the community that they are being employed to help and the situation in which they are operating. This also means they will be less likely to develop those interpersonal connections that can lead to richer communications with end users and deeper interpersonal knowledge which may provide an important means of stimulating reflexive and creative development processes (García-Peñalvo et al., 2013), which in turn, have the potential of further increase a project's viability and sustainability.

By positioning and seeing themselves as 'learners' in each tourism for development initiative in which they are involved, the six consultants emphasised the importance of approaching tourism for development from a local knowledge system perspective, rather than a consultant-as-expert knowledge system.

> I've certainly worked with consultants who have been recent arrivals in the destination and the location, and who don't know the environmental setting, but in most cases the community does know … they have their own knowledge that is valid… Part of the problem is we come with our common Western views of what is valid and what isn't, and we ignore traditional knowledge. Another thing that's important when with working with communities is to accept their knowledge system and what it means and actually use it because often they have conservation strategies that are valid.
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> [(C17)]

Local knowledge

As co-creation comes from a position of equality rather than dominance (Ind & Coates, 2013), recognition of the value of local knowledge is indeed central with equal emphasis on both local and expert knowledge structures (Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019; Wengel et al., 2019). This means local knowledge and expertise needs to be recognised not only as crucial to the success of any project, but also as one of the key drivers of tourism for development projects. When consultants and other experts working in tourism for development view local knowledge as being just as important as expert knowledge, then the identification of solutions will become shaped by local knowledge and expertise.

Flint and Meyer zu Natrup (2019) further suggest that to truly understand the local situation and the value of local knowledge, experts need to become embedded within the local community. This enables them to observe, ask questions, and keep an open mind to all potential ideas and solutions without making judgements. By becoming embedded in the local community in this way, consultants are then more likely to utilize knowledge structures that place equal emphasis on both local and expert knowledge structures. The value of living or being embedded within the local community for whom a tourism for development project was being developed was certainly emphasised by some of the consultants in this study.

> Consultants need to be able or willing to live in these remote communities themselves and really become part of the community for it to be effective. If you sit down with a group of people for long enough and you just sit and watch, it becomes apparent who the leaders are, what the different viewpoints are, where the natural divisions of power and politics and everything lies. It's all there.
>
> [(C5)]

> To understand what is happening you have to spend more time. If you fly in and go, "oh yes this and this and this, yes, yes, yes" and then you fly out in two days, how can you know the problems? And that's sort of the problem with consultants. You have to spend more time. And the amount of time – it took two years (for me) to learn everything that was happening and to understand. So, if people fly in and fly out then it's very difficult to get an understanding of what's really happening. People will tell you one thing, but underneath there are many other things happening.
>
> [(C8)]

When consultants approach tourism for development consultancies from such a perspective, where there is equal emphasis on both local and expert knowledge structures, they are more likely to adopt methods of knowledge generation that decentralise power and define solution generation in terms of community-driven processes. Decentralising power from the providers of aid (that is, those involved in helping a developing region, such as donor organisations and consultants) to the users of aid (the local people in that developing region) enables development processes to thus become much more rooted in community needs and desires (Wengel et al., 2019), creating a force for participation and democratisation, and creating meaning for all (Ind & Coates, 2013). Therefore, from a knowledge co-creation perspective, the project beneficiaries (local communities) must be asked to identify key problems and then, with support from 'expert' knowledge, identify solutions for themselves. The consultant's knowledge role is thus to facilitate this process, as well as the proposed solutions that emerge. Indeed, as any solutions identified would be shaped by local knowledge systems and expertise, and local participants are able to learn from the process, the approach enables a far greater degree of project sustainability. This may also mean that consultants could exit the project much earlier in the process.

On the other hand, co-creation and indeed any knowledge generation or sharing process that aims to facilitate and enable learning is based on assumptions. There is an assumption that the local community are willing to be engaged, and an assumption

that there are local champions to carry the process forward. Certainly, the tourism literature has documented for several decades the many barriers to community participation and engagement (Tosun, 2000). As some of the participants in this study noted, "They don't care. They're not part of it and it's not their money, so they just don't care" (I5), and, "…a lot of the communities are not engaged enough in the process too, or the project is not long enough to build their capacity… so when the project finishes, it has not been sufficient [in terms of] training, capacity building and resources to continue it [the project] and they fall over" (C1).

Reflexive practitioners

In adopting a knowledge role where the consultant *facilitates* the process of end user problem identification and solution development, it is essential the consultant is able to accept that mistakes and failures will likely be an inevitable, and integral part of the process. Through 'learning by doing', local participants can develop the knowledge and skills that can contribute to the long-term sustainability of the project. Indeed, in discussing their consultancy practices, each of the six consultants whose consultancy practice was reflective of a knowledge co-creation approach spoke about the value of making mistakes.

> We made some mistakes [in the planning and development process] but there were a lot of positives there. Out of the mistakes there was a lot of good things, and what happened was that they [the locals] would show each other, "this is what I've done". They learned and learning continued.
>
> [(C17)]

When consultants approach mistakes and failures as valuable learning opportunities rather than as something which wastes time and resources, then they are also arguably more likely to engage in a consultancy approach that views local participant decision-making (and thus mistake-making) as essential to the process of a tourism for development project. When mistakes are viewed as integral to the process of development, then reflexivity around these mistakes also enable users (including consultants) to learn for future iterations of the project design, development and implementation. Indeed, in knowledge co-creation, reflexivity plays a key role in the approach to the way knowledge is generated. A process of becoming more self-aware (Mills et al., 2010), reflexivity in consulting practice enables practitioners to reflect on their own biases, predispositions and preferences in the development and knowledge generation processes. When consultants practice reflexivity they make conscious choices about how they will think and act, thus becoming responsible and accountable for their choices, their actions, and their contributions to a relational system (Oliver, 2005).

In tourism for development, reflexivity in consultancy practice arguably helps to re-focus the orientation of tourism for development projects; rather than being results-oriented, focused on the end result, the focus is instead on the *process* and the learning that occurs as a result of that process (Flint & Meyer zu Natrup, 2019; Ind & Coates, 2013; Wengel et al., 2019). For instance, in discussing strategies to enhance and support more meaningful local engagement and participation, the journey or process itself was seen as the most important part of the project. Indeed, some referred to the initial conversations with local people and communities as the most crucial conversation in the whole consultancy process and the key success factor; "…identify[ing] their weaknesses and where were the gaps in their knowledge" (C14), and

> There is a process where you work with the stakeholders either individually or collectively to understand what their clear goals are. Why do they want to use tourism? Secondly, what are the key issues? Thirdly, what's the key situation? Fourthly, usually, working out what the actions are. (C9)

Of value to the delivery of the project then, is its design and trusting local participants to arrive at their own desired goals in that design process. Reflexive practice has been specifically connected to the handling of both complexity and the problem of polarization, a mechanism of simplification that divides reality into dualistic opposites, such as good-bad, right-wrong, positive-negative (Oliver, 2005). While this strategy does work in some situations, for example where a decision needs to be made in relation to donor funds, in many situations the polarization strategy will simplify decision-making and solution-generation processes in a way that overlooks local knowledge systems and thus, the richness and possibility inherent in these systems.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore two key objectives; to understand the role of consultants in their development work within developing country contexts; and, the consultants approaches to the ways in which knowledge is created and exchanged. In doing so, we sought to explore assumptions presented in the literature that have suggested there has been a shift in the way consultants approach knowledge for development and understand whether approaches such as co-creation are in fact adopted in practice.

The consultants interviewed in this study varied in the way they viewed their roles. Some very firmly saw themselves as experts where their primary role was to 'transfer' and 'teach' the local people, others conceptualised this role more in terms of being an 'intermediary', 'facilitator' and 'co-creator'. As such, the consultants' approach to community engagement varied. Some noted that it was usually an objective of the process and largely dependent on the requirements of the funding agency. However, even where this was an expectation, there was certainly variation in terms of the extent to which such engagement was

perceived as genuine. Despite this, most respondents discussed that their personal philosophy and approach was to adopt more genuine and legitimate forms of community engagement and participation.

It has been recognised in the literature that knowledge co-creation is increasingly replacing more traditional approaches to knowledge transfer in development spheres (Morais et al., 2016; Van Niekerk et al., 2017; Voorberg et al., 2015; Wengel et al., 2019); on one end of the continuum moving knowledge from the source to users, shifting to learning, and creating and developing knowledge that is particular to local contexts. In this study, a small number of participants (six) used the language of co-creation when discussing their engagement approaches, focusing on collaboration, joint ventures and sharing, for example. Certainly, there were a number of notable differences in the way these consultants spoke about their practice compared to the other eleven consultant who were interviewed. The former clearly saw themselves as part of the process of constructing knowledge and not as deliverers of knowledge. They were less focused on the power dynamics of working with local communities and discussed at length how knowledge can be developed together, with local ownership to support the implementation phases of the consultancy projects. The value and importance of local knowledge also emerged very strongly through these discussions, particularly the ability to harness and integrate local knowledge in the project. This was seen as fundamental not only to the success of the particular project, but also the role of consultants as reflective practitioners.

The results of this study have provided insights into the role of consultants in development, particularly the part they play in creating and sharing knowledge to create local capacity; an area which has not been empirically explored in a tourism context to date. If tourism for development is to make a real and sustainable difference to the communities it is trying to affect, then arguably we need to better understand, and respond to, some of the barriers to knowledge generation, transfer, and creation. Certainly, the literature has been critical about the contributions consultants can make in development aid, and this study has reinforced that the situation in tourism for development has many of the same limitations.

While many tourism for development consultancies currently function in the form of a hybrid approach between expert and reflective practitioner, meaning many consultants do practice a more reflective and collaborative consultancy approach, this study found that nearly two-thirds of the consultants interviewed subscribe to an approach that, while collaborative, also places the consultants' expert knowledge at the centre of the development and consultancy processes. This means that consultants employed to support tourism for development projects in developing countries and regions are either ambivalent to the value of local knowledge, or they are missing the opportunity to utilize valuable local knowledge. We acknowledge that of course there are limitations. The capacity for local people to meaningfully engage is constrained by a number of factors; time to invest in such processes, physical access and possessing the perceived skills to contribute. Although this study was conducted prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, local capacity constraints will likely be exacerbated as developing countries attempt to rebuild a sector that has been decimated, particularly those that are hyper dependent on tourism.

Other constraints are the systems in which consultants operate. For instance, the work of consultants is, by its very nature, commercial, contract based and usually short term. As such, it is often very challenging for consultants to engage with the context of their projects in an in-depth manner, this was a fact raised by a number of the consultants in this study. They are also subject to the requirements of funding body directives. However, as suggested by Borda-Rodriguez and Johnson (2013), the valuing of beneficiaries' knowledge has considerable importance if knowledge engagements are to have positive, sustainable outcomes and relevance for beneficiaries, and if they are to lead to the co-construction of new knowledge that is contextually based.

While unidirectional approaches to knowledge generation in development, which places experts and their expertise at the centre of knowledge generation, often stems directly from established donor funding models, perhaps it is time we start to challenge this approach in tourism for development, instead moving towards a more reflexive approach that is user (local community or beneficiary) driven. We are not suggesting here that experts and their expertise are not important to the tourism for development process. Donor aid and assistance by consultants and other experts are indeed essential for both initiating and supporting tourism development in developing countries. We are instead suggesting that while the knowledge and expertise of experts is important, perhaps not in the manner that is currently observed. As noted by Flint and Meyer zu Natrup (2019), over the last couple of decades, there have been earnest attempts to make global aid and development efforts more participatory, and the process of development more 'human'. However, even in the best examples, development experts have only succeeded in making the projects slightly more participatory, with the underlying ownership of the work continuing to remain with donor organisations which impose their 'Western' knowledge structures and visions on the project recipients. In this study, the 'Western' perspective was a noted limitation of the study with a number of the respondents based in Australia and Oceania countries. Future research would benefit from exploring consultants from a broader range of countries of residence (or origin), as well as the developing country contexts in which they have worked.

In rethinking the way expert knowledge is approached and used in tourism for development (and perhaps even more widely in tourism generally), we propose that knowledge co-creation become the dominant knowledge approach used to inform tourism development initiatives, and to generate and share new tourism-related knowledge. Such an approach would offer a more reflexive, user-driven knowledge generation model that is based on bi-directional (or multi-directional) knowledge exchange, dialogic interaction, and equality (between experts and end users). It also offers a model of knowledge exchange that provides mutual learning experiences for all actors involved, and not just for those deemed as the 'end users'.

A paradigmatic shift towards a more egalitarian approach in tourism for development in which there is both recognition of local knowledge and an equal emphasis placed on both local and expert knowledge structures would indeed point to a more sophisticated understanding of the importance of utilizing knowledge that is co-generated. As suggested by Koch and Weingart (2016), this would create conditions that better allow for a process of co-creation of knowledge that is both scientifically sound and up to date, as well as adequately adapted to local circumstances. By reconceptualising tourism for development as

something that is driven by local knowledge and then progressed with the support of experts, (such as consultants) through a knowledge co-creation approach, then we contend that the issues that have beset the sector can begin to be overcome.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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