

In a previous life I sold “frocks” - in fact, clothes for tall women. When we entered the market in the very early 80s there were a few small independents attempting to address this nascent, but growing, demand. We built a strong, knowledgeable and loyal customer base and by 2000 had some 30 stores across the UK ... still an SME but a significant player - but even the most loyal of customers were frustrated that they couldn't find clothes to fit them on the high street ...

Now, some 25 years later, tall women can shop on the high street and purchase the product they want from well known brands.

What possible relevance can that have to pro-poor tourism you ask?

Well, I see the growth in pro-poor or responsible tourism in the same light. With all the recent publicity about pro-tourism one could be tempted to believe that the demand for responsible travel products and the satisfaction of that demand is a new phenomenon. It is not. But it has until recently been the domain of SMEs. As with most other markets, the corporates follow where SMEs lead. We prove the demand, pave the way and they then come in and cherry pick. Don't misunderstand me. As a passionate advocate of pro-poor tourism I am keen to see this ethos embraced by the large corporates, but I want it to be embraced honestly not simply as the next “hot” tourism product.

Pro-poor tourism must involve local people in egalitarian and respectful relationships. The vast majority of responsible, pro-poor tourism operators have developed through close partnerships with local communities. They've had to build those relationships. Trust and respect may have been the only currency they could offer at the start. Many corporates profess partnership but it is rarely a partnership of truly equal power – it is usually purchasing power rather than the power of partnership.

My point? For truly responsible pro-poor tourism product, the local people must be engaged. I urge vision to encourage leaders such as Paul at Calabash, Raj at socialtours, Gopi at the blue yonder to name only 3, to contribute to this debate. Their expertise and knowledge will be invaluable. All too rarely do we hear from local responsible operators in destination countries.

My own particular field, volunteer travel, has recently seen the first purchase of a volunteer organisation by a corporate ... i-to-i by First Choice. We will see more. Some will use responsible travel as a hollow marketing buzzword, some will use the might of their purchasing power for real good. No different from any other market. The big difference is that tourism in all its guises has such power to bring real and meaningful change to economically poor communities. Done properly this market sector has great chance to do real good in the pro-poor tourism field. But to be responsible we must engage with local communities. Recent media coverage about gap and career break volunteering has shown that consumers are also waking up to this potential – they are becoming aware of the power of their travel pound when used well.

people and places encourages all other SMEs in this burgeoning travel sector to set the standards for the corporates to follow. It is our responsibility to set and steer a course for others to follow – working in close relationships and partnerships with local communities where the pro-poor agenda can achieve direct benefit.

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