



# SOCIAL CAPITAL AND TOURISM ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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**Abstract:** This research applies the concept of social capital to help generate an understanding of tourism business development in Guangxi, China. An overall, robust effect of individual social capital on entrepreneurship in tourism is found, even though the effect varies across different dimensions of the social capital concept. Specifically, structural social capital is positively related to both an individual's ability to enterprise and the individual's probability of establishing a tourism business. Relational social capital contributes to the ability to enterprise, but does not demonstrate any significant impact on the probability of start-up. Cognitive social capital is marginal in both cases. Important implications are drawn for tourism business development, especially in rural and/or developing areas. **Keywords:** social capital, entrepreneurship, business incubation, China, developing countries. © 2011 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## INTRODUCTION

Interests in using tourism as an international development tool have increased dramatically in the last decade, as best evidenced by the rise of the pro-poor tourism campaign and the launch of the Sustainable Tourism-Eliminating Poverty program by World Tourism Organization (2002, 2004). Within this process, small enterprise development is commonly recognized as a gateway to economic independency, community empowerment and capacity building (Echtner, 1995a; Manyara & Jones, 2007). The aim of this study is to apply the concept of social capital to help generate an understanding of the phenomenon that a certain percentage of residents in a destination choose to establish and operate a tourism business, while many others living in the same locale choose not to pursue this option.

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Past development experience has indicated that addressing only the vocational training or financing needs of the region often fails to reach and make a measurable impact on the poorest, in that poverty is by nature entrenched in the social fabric of local communities (Fairley, 1998). A social capital perspective, which assumes that resources embedded in one's social relationships can be mobilized to support entrepreneurship (Davidsson & Honig, 2003), is expected to lead to a more complete explanation of the phenomenon, and reveal additional insights for successful enterprise development in the context of developing countries.

## SOCIAL CAPITAL AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP IN TOURISM

There is no universally accepted definition for entrepreneurship, but general agreement has been achieved on the essence of entrepreneurship—the initiation of change through creation or innovation that usually bears risk (Morrison, Rimmington, & Williams, 1999; Yang & Wall, 2008). Shane and Venkataraman (2000) emphasize that entrepreneurship is about discovering and exploiting opportunities. It is suggested that entrepreneurship research should deal with the phenomena of emergence, such as how opportunities are detected and acted upon, or how new organizations come into being (Gartner, 1985). In accordance with this understanding, the most obvious form of entrepreneurship is that of starting up new businesses. In tourism research, business gestation has not yet been treated as a complicated process that merits close examination. Research efforts to date are mostly devoted to understanding the characteristics and business practices of established firms (Getz & Carlsen, 2005). As such, policy prescriptions are often oriented to solving managerial problems, but provide little guidance for the creation of new enterprises.

Extant literature on entry into entrepreneurship can be generally categorized into two streams of enquiry (Liao & Welsch, 2005). The first stream of research focuses on “the person”—an individual's propensity and ability to enterprise. Research on propensity to enterprise is primarily concerned with the psychological and behavioral characteristics of entrepreneurs. An interesting finding in this regard is that a large proportion of tourism entrepreneurs in western countries are driven by lifestyle-related benefits rather than profits (Getz & Carlsen, 2000). Research on ability to enterprise emphasizes the importance of human capital and availability of required resources. This topic is far from adequately addressed in tourism research. The other stream of research highlights the influences of “the environment” in stimulating entrepreneurial initiatives, such as market, policy and economic fluctuations. This study follows the first stream of research, and is specifically interested in exploring the linkage between social capital and one's ability to enterprise in the tourism sector.

The application of the social capital concept in tourism research is comparatively lacking. Little attention has been paid to the roles of social capital in regional and community tourism development, with only a few exceptions (e.g., Johannesson, Skaptadottir, & Benediktsson,

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