

## **SOCIAL TOURISM AS A POTENTIAL MEASURE TO REDUCE SOCIAL EXCLUSION**

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### **1. DEFINITION**

“Social tourism” is a term used to describe a wide variety of holiday types, destinations and target groups: social tourism initiatives can be commercial and non-commercial, governmental and private. They range from small charities organising holidays for children from low-income backgrounds, over government plans improving accessibility in hotels, to private tour operators offering ecological holidays. What all of these initiatives have in common, is that they bring a moral dimension to tourism, and that their primary aim is to include people in tourism who would otherwise be excluded from it. This text will focus particularly on one of these groups: low-income families with children, who cannot afford to go on holiday without support.

### **2. A POTENTIAL POLICY AGAINST SOCIAL EXCLUSION?**

Supporters of visitor-related social tourism for low-income groups like to view this type of social tourism as a potential measure in the fight against social exclusion. This view was recently supported by the European Economic and Social Committee, which, in its Barcelona declaration, links social tourism to a set of benefits, which include improvement of well-being, personal development of the beneficiaries and the host community, European citizenship, improved health and increased employment opportunities (EESC 2006, 73).

In several countries of mainland Europe (for example France, Belgium, Spain), social tourism – mostly in the form of low-cost, national holidays- is supported by public funding. In Britain and the US, social tourism for low-income groups is a less well-known phenomenon, and rarely supported by government funding. This can be linked to the fact that these are liberal and more “individualized” societies, where without clear research evidence of the benefits of social tourism for society, no public funding can be justified. In the UK for example, there currently seems very little government policy interest in the topic: “Tourism for All”, albeit mainly focused on enabling access to tourism for persons with disabilities, is a topic in the 1999 “Tomorrow’s Tourism” policy (DCMS 1999, 79); but in the 2004 follow-up policy document, “Tomorrow’s Tourism Today”, there is no reference to it (DCMS 2004). Assistance to the disadvantaged is largely confined to grants from charitable bodies (Smith and Hughes 1999, 132), although some local authorities make contributions to holidays.

### **3. RESEARCH EVIDENCE**

An extensive study was carried out with the support of the Family Holiday Association, a London-based social tourism charity, which provides about 1100 families per year in the UK with a holiday. All these families are on a low income, and can be affected by various social problems: they can be carers for disabled children, asylum seekers, women who have fled a violent relationship, persons affected by HIV or people with mental health problems. Holidays usually last one week, and the great majority of them are taken in Britain, often in basic, self-catering holiday parks at the seaside in the low season. Most families go on an individual holiday, unaccompanied by a welfare agent, but social organizations can also apply for funding for group holidays they organize themselves. Welfare agents would usually accompany the group holidays, and often organize activities.

To protect the privacy of the participants, the welfare agents were first approached for help when selecting participants for the research. They were sent information letters about the research, and were called up individually. They were then asked to provide their clients who had been allocated a holiday with an invitation letter. The participants could then send the reply slip on the invitation letter back in a provided freepost envelope, call the researcher or pass their details on to their welfare agent. From these participants volunteering to participate in the research, a random sample was taken. The methods used were semi-structured interviews for individual holiday participants, and focus groups for group holiday participants. For all welfare agents, semi-structured interviews were used.

The fieldwork was carried out in two rounds. The first round was conducted the first month after the holiday and involved 40 respondents; the second round was carried out in the sixth month after the holiday and involved 30 of the original 40 respondents (a retention rate of 75%). This dual structure aimed to examine not only the immediate effects of the holiday, but also its effects in the medium term.

In the presentation of the findings, all names have been changed. Quotes reproduced literally and without changes to vocabulary and grammar, to preserve their authenticity. Quotes refer to the interviews and focus groups carried out in the first round (post-holiday interview 1 or PHI1) and the second round (post-holiday interview 2 or PHI2).

#### **4. RESEARCH FINDINGS**

##### **Family development**

An improvement in the family relations of the respondents was one of the clearest outcomes in the first round of interviews, one month after the return of the respondents. The great majority of respondents indicated positive behavior changes in this domain, mainly referring to the relationship with the children, the time spent with them and the change in parenting styles. One participant for example mentioned how she and her daughter spend more time together since the holiday, and how they enjoy each other's company more (PH1).

Lindsey (participant): *I am spending quite a lot of time with my little one now, quality time. Maybe it's just sitting down at home doing a puzzle, or sitting in the garden having biscuits together. Or going out in the weekend.*

Daniel, a disabled father of a teenage son, reported how their relationship had improved dramatically after the holiday (PH1).

Daniel (participant): *It's a lot better yeah. He's certainly opened up more, at one time he wouldn't speak to anybody, like when you'd say, how was work. But now he's like "I am doing this today", "I am doing that today". He's looking forward to go to college, and everything seems to be falling into place. He's happy now. (PH1)*

A concern that was voiced by the majority of the welfare agents was that parents did not often play or spend time with their children. After one month a general improvement in this domain was reported. Many examples showed how this positively affected the children (doing better at school, being proud and happy to spend time with their parents, children being better behaved), and the parents (feeling less guilty, feeling more positive towards the children, spending quality time together).

In the second round, these increases were still present in most cases. This effect was mainly noted in the relationship between parents and children. Lindsey was one of the parents who also in the second round of interviews emphasized how she and her daughter were still closer, and how that positively influenced the behavior of the child (PHI2)

Lindsey (participant): *Last weekend we went up to London to the Lord Mayor Show. She really enjoyed it actually ... It was weird because normally I don't really go out much and spend time on my own with her like that but it was really good.*

## Personal development

### Confidence

In the first round of interviews, the findings regarding *confidence* were twofold. On the one hand there were cases where the holiday had been successful and the participants reported an increase in confidence. This applied to the group holidays in all cases, and to the individual holidays where the respondents were generally able to cope. Sandra, who participated in a group holiday, mentioned how being in a group led her to try new activities, and do things she would not have done on her own (PHI1).

Sandra (participant): *Also being with other single parents, they are more or less in the same boat, like my little one, you think I am not the only one, everybody else is the same. So that opened my eyes a bit.*

Interviewer: And did that give you a bit of strength?

S: *More confidence yeah. Because otherwise we would have just sat here and not do anything, so that were quite good.* (PHI1)

On the other hand there were the respondents who had found the holiday very challenging, because of the lack of support, or because of the lack of organized entertainment. This can be linked back to the relationship between the goal difficulty level and performance. In this case the respondents felt over-stimulated or threatened by the difficulties they encountered on the holiday. Rupert was an example of this over-stimulation, he found an individual holiday with three children damaging to his confidence as a parent.

Rupert (participant): *It was a nice bit of bonding for them three. But for myself it wasn't really very relaxing. I found it a little hard really. I would have found it easier staying at home, because I have all my equipment and everything here. And there was more to do in the garden here than there was there, you know, for the little ones.* (PHI1)

These findings highlight how the holiday type needs to be tailored to the participants to achieve the desired results. Holidays are no one-stop-shops for benefits to develop: they can provide the participants with learning situations that can potentially change their behavior, but this does not happen automatically. These particular participants would have benefited from a higher level of support during the holiday, either in the form of a group holiday or in the form of more organized activities for children and adults. Organized entertainment was often seen as a way to structure the holiday, and many respondents who went on individual holidays expressed a preference for holiday camps where a lot of entertainment opportunities were available.

### Social contact

The group holidays generally resulted in an extension of the support network for the participants. The respondents often reported that the chance to talk about their problems to people in the same situation as a great benefit of the holiday. For example participants Harry and Anthony both mentioned making new friends on the holiday, whom they were aiming to keep in touch with (PHI1). In some cases respondents who had been on an individual family holiday had also increased their support network, although this was mostly limited to family members who accompanied single parents on the holiday. Other participants of individual family holidays though did not report an increase in social contact. In some cases this was a conscious decision and the family wanted to concentrate on improving its relations internally. In other cases though respondents felt isolated and unable to participate in social activities for adults, because of childcare obligations. Rupert described how he would have loved just to go for a walk in the evening, but he could not because there was no babysitting service available (PHI1). Again, here a group holiday or supported holiday might have been a holiday type that suited the participant's needs better, and could have yielded better results.

### Changing perspectives

In the first month after the holiday, about half of the participants and welfare agents described the escape from routine as one of the most important benefits of the holiday. Being able to leave the worries and financial problems at home, and concentrate on more positive things was shown to change the perspective of the participants. Many welfare agents like Aisha and Anne emphasized how the daily worries could make people so focused on them, "they can't see beyond that" (PHI1). Daniel, a disabled man who lives with his teenage son, also testified how being away from the unsafe estate where he lives, made him free his mind to spend time with his son (PHI1).

Daniel (participant): *I wasn't too excited at first, because, where I live, there is a lot of drug users, and I didn't wanna leave me house. The week we were going away there was scaffolding up as well. And I am on the second floor, where nobody gets to, but then they put scaffolding. And I've got a back balcony, so someone could get up the balcony. So that was a weight on me mind. But on the holiday I was more relaxed, and so was me son, he's opened up more, he's telling us what he's doing* (PHI1).

In the second round, these results were not only maintained but the examples of behavior change became much more marked. This would indicate that the effects of the holiday need some time to be incorporated into the behavior of the participants. It also became noticeable that support from the WFA was an important factor in this process, and that this support was sought more often after than before the holiday.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the value of social tourism for low-income groups, in terms of the benefits it can bring to the participants both in the short term and in the medium term. It has shown that for a modest investment in terms of time and money, holidays can facilitate significant benefits in the personal and family development of the participants. It has also highlighted new aspects of the social impacts of tourism, and has shown the potential of tourism as a part of social policy: not only because of the inherent benefits of the holiday, but also as a support for the success of other, existing interventions.