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The significance of dark tourism in the process of tourism development after a long-term political conflict: an issue of Northern Ireland

INTRODUCTION

Dark tourism is a relatively new area of tourism research. It is defined by Foley and Lennon (1996:198) as “the phenomenon which encompasses the presentation and consumption (by visitors) of real and commodified death and disaster sites”. The phenomenon has drawn substantial attention from academic research in recent years, for instance (Seaton 1999, Lennon and Foley 2000, Milles 2002, Sharpley 2006, Stone 2006, etc) and is becoming widely recognised as a tourism niche for both tourism academia and practitioners. The definitions of the phenomenon and its components are somewhat vague and have emerged as being unnecessarily comprehensive. Academic research focuses on a certain aspect of the phenomenon. Tarlow (2005:48) defines it as having the dimension of the interaction between supply and demand as “visitation to places where tragedies or historically noteworthy death has occurred and that continue to impact our lives”. Although research continues to flourish concerning the supply-side of the phenomenon, the area which concerns the social component, for instance local communities where the site is located, has been largely neglected within the current literature. Recent studies of dark tourism are concerned with depicting its concept. Stone (2006) defines dark tourism as depending on the intensity of the interest and the actual motive to travel to see the site. His concept presents the difference between the actual sites of dark tourism and the sites which are associated with dark tourism. An instance for the former is Auschwitz and an instance of latter is the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC. He notes that places which are the sites of dark tourism are “darker” than the places which are associated with an actual phenomenon. Hardly any research related to the dark tourism phenomenon takes into account recent conflict and the views of those communities involved in the conflict. The relationship between the local community, the visiting of the site and the conflict is not clearly explained. Additionally, current research does

not elaborate the time dimension, i. e. What is the meaning of the word recent in this context? Here it is defined as the status that still impacts on the lives of the people who live within the area and is still influenced by legislation and regulations which are the consequence of the conflict.

Sites associated with relatively recent conflict and their openness to tourism has an impact on a community within the area where the site is located. The early work of Smith (1998) and Liesle (2000) acknowledges the impact conflict has on a society. Their research illustrates a strong link between war and tourism. They depict conflict as heritage. Weaver (2000) presents the influence which war has on a tourism area life cycle (Butler 1980), explaining that some phenomena related to war are relatively popular with the tourists and therefore influence the tourism area life cycle.

Inherently, the consequence of a long-term conflict is conceptualised as a dark tourism phenomenon. Therefore, this paper sets the discussion in the context of local communities directly involved in conflict. After the conflict they deal with tourists who come to see the sites. The aim of this research is to understand local communities and their role in the whole process of tourism development related to dark tourism.

This study explores the process of tourism development in Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, where severe troubles and political violence escalated in the period from 1967 to 1995 between loyalists as a protestant and republicans as a catholic community. The violence ended in August 1995 with the Good Friday Agreement. According to the Agreement tourism emerged as one of six 'matters for co-operation' for the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC). It resulted in a creation of Tourism Ireland (TI), an organisation charged with the promotion of the tourism of both the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI) as one destination in a joint tourism promotion.

METHODOLOGY

The fieldwork follows a qualitative methodological approach. This is required in order to gather complex information concerning an issue of this type of tourism in a post-conflict society. The main research method involved thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, which were previously conducted with tourism decision-makers and tour providers. As an auxiliary method, the research employed a participant observation technique, which included political tours of Belfast. The next section presents the process of data collection and introduces the interview sample. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with ten respondents were conducted over a two 2-week period in May 2006 in Belfast, Northern Ireland. Sampling criteria were as follows:

- Represent a wide range of decision-makers within the tourism industry in NI
- In NI during the trouble; Most of the interviewees (I1, I3, I4, I5, I9 and I10) worked within the tourism industry during the troubles. I2, I6, I7 started to work in the tourism industry in the period since the Good Friday Agreement (1995). I8 joined tourism in NI in 2000.
- Recognised as key players within the industry. Their position allows them to represent the opinion of the employers in the organisation
- Experience of managing tourism in the post conflict society

The most important selection criterion was that the interviewee was a decision- maker with the experience of the issues which emerged during the process.

The study aim was achieved by understanding how people involved in tourism development in the area after a political conflict perceived the whole process. In that sense, the interview sample is important to the validity of the study.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. An overview of the participants is outlined in Table 1.1. As an auxiliary method, the researcher employed participant observation. The researcher observed three political tours in Northern Ireland and one general city tour of Belfast. The researcher found this important as it provided the study with the details which enabled understanding of the phenomenon as a whole and linked the issues.

Table 1. 1: Interviewee sample

Interviewee	Area of expertise	Position
Interviewee 1	City of Belfast	Senior manager
Interviewee 2	Local community	Project Manager
Interviewee 3	City of Belfast	Senior manager
Interviewee 4	City of Belfast	Senior manager
Interviewee 5	Northern Ireland	Project manager
Interviewee 6	Local community	Senior manager and counsellor
Interviewee 7	Local community	Project Manager
Interviewee 8	Northern Ireland	Senior manager
Interviewee 9	City of Belfast	Senior manager
Interviewee 10	Local community	Project Manager

A phenomenological research was employed in this research. This methodological approach consists of the subject of the study (interviewees in this case), the researcher who interprets the meanings interviewees are giving to the study and the process of phenomenological reflection, which links the researcher to the meanings given to the phenomena (Van Manen 1990). The first step in phenomenological reflection lies in conducting a thematic analysis. It gives a degree of order and systematises the task. Ultimately, the interpretive purpose of ‘theme’ is to determine the experiential structures that constitute the understanding. It is the essence of phenomenological research.

Through the process of reflection on essential themes, the research resulted in phoenix tourism as a part of a wider conceptual framework which defines tourism development in the context of reconciliation after a long term political conflict and includes visitation to the sites of a political significance. Another dimension to the

dark tourism discourse is added; exploring the interaction between this type of tourism, urban regeneration and social reconciliation after the war or long-term political conflict. Therefore, this research redefines the term dark tourism as phoenix tourism. The term phoenix tourism the researcher defines as the process of social reconciliation and urban regeneration of the people and areas which were directly involved in a political conflict, having tourism development through the visiting of these sites as the main factor within the process. In analysing the data, four major features were identified:

1. networks and partnerships
2. delivery and interpretation
3. market segmentation
4. terminology

The next section explains the identified features separately noting their relevance.

NETWORKS AND PARTNERSHIPS

According to Selin and Chavez (1995), crises present a significant catalyst for the partnership. As a part of a development framework of the City of Belfast, there emerged a Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) which defined its role as “promotion of reconciliation and regeneration”. It consists of the bodies which represented communities within the city of Belfast beyond ethnic space (www.blsp.org). Five boards exist; North, South, East, West and Greater Shankill . Under LSP umbrella, there emerged a partnership between the organisations related to the West Belfast area inhabited mostly by Nationalists and the Greater Shankill area inhabited mostly by Loyalists, who were directly involved in sectarian troubles between 1967 and 1995. Partnerships are formed if there is a common vision to share (Selin and Chavez 1995).

The partnership between the communities who were previously in conflict was established through tourism development. There were two main reasons for developing this partnership. Firstly, it was customers' demand. Niche markets, mainly motivated by education purposes, wanted to understand both communities' points of view on the recent political conflict. West Belfast and Great Shankill formed a partnership. In essence this was a relationship formed between former political prisoners' organisations in both areas.

We are a community- based organisation, we joined together to deliver this product, it is a market, a niche who wants it. We both share a great interest in facilitating and providing those tours. They want to hear both sides and, of course, that we will join together to deliver that. We understand each other well; both communities are having the same problem, we are from the same world

I7 (58-63)

There is a huge demand from the universities, various peace studies and conflict resolution studies. Republicans were more proactive in that project. But they cannot do it alone as those university groups want to hear both sides. Then republicans contacted us and we started thinking about tourism and political tours as well. We saw the opportunity in that as well

I2 (26-31)

There are the whole university classes. We are not just facilitating republican viewpoints, but we are also facilitating unionist viewpoints, different issues, victims, ex prisoners, a wide range, all sorts of examples

I2 (50-57)

Secondly, both communities were deprived areas with common social problems. Interviewees identified the issues of unemployment, social exclusion and former political prisoners. The issues were common to both communities and they related to each other easily in that sense. According to a Belfast City Council Report (2006), both boroughs are included in the worst 10% in the UK. Tourism is, according to Szivas and Riley (1999) an attractive and accessible employment for people with various set of skills and labour intensive activity is therefore positively correlated with job provision. Those findings were important for the area which was overwhelmed

with the problems of social exclusion and unemployment. Political prisoners have been experiencing legal barriers in finding jobs. Tourism presents an employment opportunity. Provision of training helps in a process of gaining collective self-esteem and confidence which is a prerequisite for any further development.

It is very worth, I have to admit...I think more people have training, they have a better background, confidence, and their product will be stronger
I2 (393-397)

So ...political ex prisoners are really discriminated in a way. It is a huge percentage of the population in West Belfast, 15 000 of them went through the jails in the past 30 years. 6 000 of them now live in West Belfast. .. If it wouldn't had been a conflict here, they would not have been in prison. We see it as a sizable section of our community that was discriminated against in everyday life

I2 (149-158)

They are by majority normal people, political prisoners, not criminals...The toughest remits are to secure employment for them and it was what motivated us to start with tourism jobs

I7 (7-12)

It emerged that economic and social exclusion put political issues and conflict in the background. Although those two communities were in a direct violent conflict for more than thirty-five years, they managed to develop a working relationship and formalise it into a partnership. Tourism was perceived as a neutral in this case as it brought neutral people, a third party, on the scene.

DELIVERY AND INTERPRETATION

There are two distinct providers of political tours. The distinction is based on whether they are based within the local community or they are based outside. The main difference between them is related to issues of delivery and interpretation. The next section will illustrate the main characteristics of both providers.

Providers based outside of the communities deliver *a sanitised version* of the conflict, a tour appealing to the generic markets. The community lacks tourism infrastructure which is necessary for generic markets. Therefore, social and economic

benefits from this type of tour do not stay within the community. Tourists come in large numbers, but due to the lack of tourism facilities appealing to generic markets; they do not stay within the area. In the community there are no hotels or tourism amenities. Furthermore, local communities are not in favour of tours provided in that way. They feel thus being stared at and in extreme cases are even hostile as it was perceived that people from the outside (other providers) are exploiting the legacy of conflict. Local communities are concerned with verbal communication and mannerisms tour guides employ when interpreting the issues of the recent troubles. The verbal communication employed by tour guides when delivering the tour is important for the community. Tour guides from outside the community use language and expressions, which the community perceives as insensitive and wrong.

They are using language which is not very appropriate and of course when local people hear it, they do not like it. These guys starved themselves to death, they committed suicide in jail, and this is not the language. People who pass by, they would stop and say, excuse me!!! They would not be so happy
I2 (480-484)

On the other hand, tour providers from the community deliver tours which are more acceptable by local community and which offer evidence of a real reconciliation between those two communities made on tourism. Tour groups organised by providers from the outside of the community tended to be large. Their size was considered as being in disproportion to the community ability to cope with their feelings. The researcher named tourism providers from outside the community “Red bus providers” and referred to the whole phenomena as the “Red bus syndrome”. During the interviews red buses were often used as an example. They were easily noticed on the streets. They present the official voice, disproportionably big and different. It was a phenomenon which emerged from this analysis. The company which runs red buses is a franchise of a company that runs tours all over Europe. In a community, the red bus was seen as a symbol of middle- class intrusion; it was brought in from the outside in

order to capitalise on their struggle; it can be seen as a certain form of the history commodification. The researcher saw it as a phenomenon when tourist numbers in certain areas were growing, but the benefits derived from tourism were not staying within the area and people there were not included in delivering a tourism product and making decisions about it. The following quotes illustrate a lack of understanding between the communities on one side and official tourism bodies on the other. The official tourism authority has a positive view on the issue, i. e;

People began to see people coming here more. For people in Belfast, one of the things people tend to notice most are city bus tours, the open top bus tours. Those small things which make people realise that the situation nowadays is becoming much more normal if you see tourism around. I always say, tourism is almost like a parameter for normality. If you see tourists here, you are becoming much more normal society

I8 (343-350)

The opposed to the community based view on the issue;

It's better that we bring people into the communities than having those big buses going around and having somebody talking about the community who is maybe even from outside the city. They don't realise, they don't know what it's like. People may have the feeling that they have been stared at, whereas if we bring people in the community, we say: Come on board, interact, you tell what your opinion is and that gives people a chance to tell the story.

I1 (304-311)

The interpretation given to the issue depends on the context. To I8, *red buses* had the meaning of normalisation. They symbolised a positive change. I1 perceive *red buses* as exploitation of the legacy of conflict.

MARKET SEGMENTS

Excluding a small niche segment, this study finds that tourism associated with the recent conflict is not a motivator for visiting. However, once tourists are there, most would visit the sites. On the other side, developed tourism infrastructure, which would encourage visitors to spend more time within the area, was scarce in the community. Tourists go there to see the sites and go back to the regenerated area. In

order to develop tourism infrastructure, more understanding between local communities and local government is needed.

There are two distinct types of tourists which visit these sites. Niche markets with a particular interest in exploring the conflict were young people as individual travellers, young people as a part of a university group with an educational interest in peace studies, conflict resolution or some other socio-political process, solidarity groups (Basque, Palestine, Kurds, Catalan, etc.) who shared similar political ideology and visiting friends and relatives (VFR) segment. Another market segment is generic market. They are not motivated by political tours, but once in Belfast, they join political tours. They include leisure travellers who come to Belfast for a short break visit, congress and conferences markets, and partly VFR segment.

To date, local communities have benefited only from the small niche tourism segment, particularly motivated by exploring the legacy of conflict. They employed local tour guides and local tour providers as they were perceived to have a better understanding of the conflict. These were university and education groups and political solidarity groups, who pre-arranged the tours. Another market segment was political solidarity groups. They share some similar political issues with their own surroundings (prisoners' issues with Basque County, etc) or they share a similar political philosophy. They are interested to see a community similar to their own. They are particularly interested in the well-being of the community and usually prefer to utilise the services provided by the communities themselves.

Both niche groups are a small fraction of all the tourists coming to Belfast.

Because constantly people come to our office from all around the world, also students, people doing their PhDs, there is a big demand for knowledge of the conflict. So we needed to create this product. There are whole classes, university classes.

I2 (50-55)

A lot of our tourists come from the Basque county, but those are the pre arranged ones and mostly from North America. More and more English are

coming over and that's very good for us. Americans, Europeans, but I probably could not put a finger and say which one is the biggest...maybe the Basque.

I2 (349-353)

Figure 1.1 presents different market segments matched to the products in which they are interested. Parallel is drawn between Cohen's (1972) tourist typology and this classification of tourists regarding their interest in political tours. Different markets require different ways of interpretation. For generic markets, the curiosity factor is the most important motivator to take part in a political or war tour or visit a site. During tours, most questions that tourists asked were related to the conflict.

I think there is a factor of intrigue which ultimately links them to it. We do not have hard and fast numbers, but I think with most of the people, there is an awareness of it what has happened, this is what Belfast is known for. It ranges from just passing through to real I must come, I must see it, I want to discover every bit, and whether is an ex- prisoner here or there...

I3 (399-403)

Local communities benefit by providing services to the niche markets. Generic markets took a political tour, but it was not managed by the local community. Generic markets were also the biggest proportion of the markets that visit the city. They came, saw the sites, took a few photos and went back. This was a usual pattern here as the generic market was motivated by a real tourism experience and therefore they needed a proper tourism infrastructure.

One more project we are working on...it is about creating a proper infrastructure, creating proper restaurants, making sure people can come in, shops, as well as hotels, we are also encouraging people to set up B&Bs. That's exactly what we are all about.

I6 (63-68)

TERMINOLOGY

Dark tourism is evidently a concept which emerges from a developed western society perspective and associated academic discourse. Although evidence shows that in 2001, 43% of the visitors came to Belfast out of curiosity, linked with the dark

tourism sites (Belfast city council report 2001), this type of tourism ascription rarely enjoys support from the governing bodies, official tourism associations and local communities, in the specific society. It may endanger the efforts to change the image of Northern Ireland. NI is trying to put itself away from the image of troubles and in that way NI is promoting itself internationally together with ROI. Cross-border cooperation is based on the similarity between tourism products in ROI and NI. Therefore, dark tourism was not a part of the official promotion strategy as those sites were related exclusively to Northern Ireland. People knew that the troubles happened in NI through other media sources. Tourism promotion of the sites was not a necessity in that sense. For all the reasons stated above, this type of tourism activity is not included in any official promotional activities related to tourism development and is not an integral part of the process of image formation. However, the tourists who came to Belfast visit the sites. This research found it an opportunity towards the process of community regeneration and revitalisation. It was not regarded as a reason to visit Belfast. It was a secondary attraction, not a motivator. Tourists knew that those sites were there and if they wanted to explore them, they could, but this type of tourism would not be promoted. Visitors and tourists were coming to see the sites, but the tourism infrastructure there was not of the required level. Tourists came, saw the site and left without making a positive impact. This study suggests reviewing the whole concept. Dark tourism as a label and as defined in previous studies cannot resemble the true meaning of the phenomenon. It does not conceptualise community revitalisation and the regeneration process. The study found phoenix tourism a more appropriate label. A phoenix is a mythological bird which rises from the ashes. The areas which were in the conflict were rising literally from the ashes. There were three ways tourism could assist the process of urban regeneration and social reconciliation. Firstly, tourism infrastructure which would comply with the command of a generic

market was not provided. Tourism may assist building the infrastructure and in that way directly influence urban regeneration.

Because there was a need to create a proper infrastructure for tourism because even in West Belfast, there are no hotels in West Belfast

I6 (52-56)

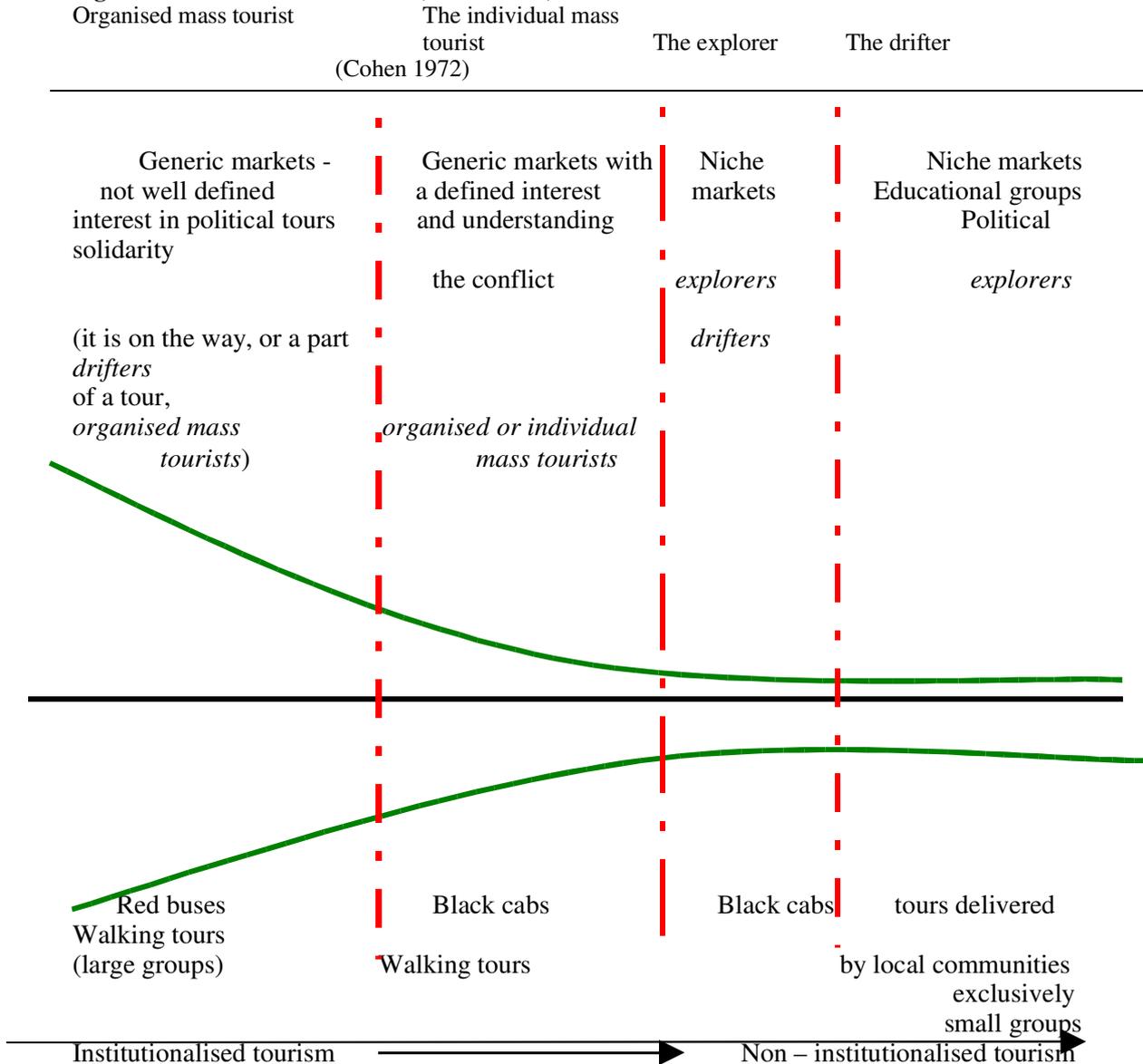
Secondly, the communities were deprived, with a lack of pride and self-esteem. Although they were coming to the area to see the sites of previous conflict, tourists were showing interest in the community and their way of life and in that sense bringing pride and self-esteem back to the community. Thirdly, if there was a tourism infrastructure developed, tourism may boost small businesses. Those three outcomes could not be conceptualised under the phenomenon of dark tourism and they are not framed by any of its definitions.

Tourists do not know the meaning of dark tourism. They relate their understanding to a single product, calling it a political tour or a war tour. The findings from the official tourism institutions suggest that the promotion of dark tourism will ruin the process of re-imaging. Being labelled as *dark* resembles a pejorative nuance towards the process. On the other side, it is possible to look upon it from the other angle and give another meaning to the whole concept; there is a possibility for community regeneration, which may solve some of the already noted community problems.

I know, but the ordinary public would not call it that name. When you call it dark tourism, the ordinary public would not know what it means. That is what you academic people call it like that. There was somebody from your university; she came to speak to me about. When she came over, she was using the terminology dark tourism as well.

I2 (362-370)

Figure 1.1 Tourist classifications (Cohen 1972)



CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Dark tourism is evidently a concept which emerged from a developed western society perspective and associated academic discourse. This type of tourism ascription rarely enjoys support from the governing bodies, official tourism associations and local communities. In fact, a dark tourism concept does not resemble the real role it has in the process of tourism development and community reconciliation. The local community areas lacked tourism infrastructure, which would encourage visitors to

spend more time within the area. At the time of writing, tourists went to the sites and then go back to the city centre.

This study recommends that tours be delivered through the partnerships. This would create more understanding between local communities and authorities and assure that the benefits stay in the local area. Local communities benefited only from a small niche particularly motivated to explore the legacy of conflict. These were university and education groups and political solidarity groups. They were a small fraction of all the tourists who were coming to Belfast and who were visiting the area. If official tourism institutions supported local communities in delivering political tours, then it may be possible to say that tourism could help revitalise the communities. In 2006, tourism development was concentrated around the areas which were already privileged with urban regeneration. With tourism development focused only on the privileged areas, the gap between privileged and deprived become even wider. This research shows that it was primarily because a strong partnership between suppliers within the area and local authorities which would support tourism development was not established. Secondly, there was a lack of trust in the communities and their ability to deliver the product. Thirdly, as this type of tourism was not planned to be promoted internationally, its existence was officially not recognised.

This research suggests employing local tour guides to deliver the tour, coming in smaller groups and paying a respect through using a politically correct language and manners with a possibility for interaction with locals during the tour. If the tour was delivered by the provider from the outside of the community, there was a certain levy to be implemented.

With its pejorative understanding by locals, dark tourism would not be a part of the process of image formation and recovery. The study concludes that official tourism bodies need to recognise the existence of the demand for knowledge of the conflict, fully integrate the local community in decision making and provide the area with appropriate tourism infrastructure, resulting in community revitalisation and regeneration. Tourist interest suggests that this type of tourism is a chance for local communities to directly participate in tourism development. With respect to the academic discourse, the study finds the concept of *phoenix tourism* to be more appropriate in the process of destination development after the conflict. This research defines phoenix tourism as a process of destination regeneration, rehabilitation, re-imaging and revitalisation after a long – term political conflict. Associated terms with phoenix tourism are phoenix destinations, phoenix sites and phoenix tourists. It is a part of history; it is what made those places what they are.

As the main characteristic of phoenix tourism is social reconciliation and urban regeneration, it does not fit in Stone's (2006) dark tourism spectrum which is made exclusively upon tourists and their perceptions. The places are rising from the ashes literally. Just like the mythological bird the phoenix.

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