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Voluntourism in the Context of Community-Based Tourism, and Regenerative Tourism: A Theoretical Exploration Focusing on Responsibility

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Abstract: The paper examines the theoretical interconnection between the concepts of voluntourism, community-based tourism, and regenerative tourism. Voluntourism, widely criticized for its implementations unethical towards local environment and community, is re-evaluated in the light of community-based and regenerative tourism principles including unequal power dynamics and questionable long-term benefits to host communities.

This paper claims that re-imagining voluntourism within the framework of regenerative tourism offers a new perspective. Regenerative tourism, characterized by its commitment to restoring, revitalizing, and enhancing the wellbeing of both natural environments and local communities, can serve as a guiding principle for voluntourism programs. Community-based tourism is integral to this theoretical exploration, as it emphasizes local participation, cultural and natural preservation, and economic empowerment. When voluntourism aligns with community-based tourism principles, it shifts its focus from short-term, self-serving actions to responsible community-driven initiatives. By channelling the motivation and resources of volunteers towards community-led regenerative initiatives, voluntourism can contribute to positive, lasting impacts. Ethical reflection is done within the actors only.

This paper is theoretical; however, its purpose is in the pragmatism of tourism concept development. It concludes to enhance the understanding of voluntourism's potential to transition from a problematic form of tourism to an ethical and responsible force for change. By reconciling voluntourism with the principles of regenerative tourism and community-based tourism, this paper aims to provide a theoretical foundation for the development of more responsible and sustainable tourism practices. In doing so, it strives to contribute to the theoretical knowledge surrounding alternative and socially sustainable tourism concepts.

Keywords: Voluntourism, Regenerative Tourism, Community-Based Tourism, Responsible Tourism, Ethical Tourism Concepts

1.   Introduction

Voluntourism (VT), community-based tourism (CBT), and regenerative tourism (RT) are widely used approaches within the broader field of tourism. The paper examines the theoretical interconnection between them, placing voluntourism in the centre. It seeks to enhance the understanding of voluntourism's potential to transition from a problematic form of tourism to an ethical and responsible force for change. This paper is a continuation of our previous research on voluntourism (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2022; Röntynen, 2022; Tunkkari-Eskelinen & Röntynen, 2023) as we noticed the need of expanding and concretizing the theoretical framework of voluntourism. As a theoretical paper, its purpose is in the pragmatism of tourism concept development. By reconciling voluntourism with the principles of regenerative tourism and community-based tourism, it aims to provide a theoretical foundation for the development of more responsible and sustainable tourism practices.

2.   Research Methods

Given the research objectives, we present literature review to develop the theoretical framework. We conducted a comprehensive search of academic databases, journals, books, but also non-academic sources, as large share of voluntourism is practically oriented and detached from academic field, and regenerative tourism is a newly emerging tourism concept. We used both databases accessible through our university and freely available online. In this search, we used relevant keywords, some of them representing synonyms, such as "voluntourism," "volunteer tourism," "community-based tourism," "regenerative tourism," and related terms, such as "saviorism," "white saviorism," "neocolonialism," "transformative tourism," "responsible tourism," "sustainable tourism", in different combinations. We started with an attempt to find clear definitions of the three main paradigms discussed in the paper, incorporating different perspectives. We refined the search according to the initial findings and conducted several iterations to include more specific aspects. We created a snowball effect by investigating the reference lists of sources already identified. Further, we systematized the collected sources according to their topic and content. This provided us with the opportunity to note both consensus aspects and existing gaps in the literature. We took the key components, identifying essential

characteristics that define the concept. We explored how the concept relates to other concepts and to each other using Strauss & Corbin's (1991) grounded theory analysis frame. We also considered the historical context and development of the concepts into practice in the latest publications. We noted critique, debates, and controversies surrounding the concepts. Literature analysis required several iterative phases of revisiting and refining the findings and scope of the research, as it is typical for grounded theory approach (see Strauss & Corbin, 1991).

3. Three Tourism Concepts: Literature Review

3.1 Voluntourism

Voluntourism is a phenomenon within the tourism industry which has evolved over a long period of time but has been systematically studied only in the last two decades, starting with Wearing's book "Volunteer tourism: Experiences that make a difference" (2001). Consensus on the definition of VT does not exist. It is important to note that some popular literature authors attempt to justify a difference between voluntourism and volunteer tourism (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2022, 361), but in the academic literature the terms are used as synonyms (e.g., Wearing & McGehee, 2013). The most significant definitions originating from academic research are listed in Table 1, which indicates that the perception of VT is becoming more inclusive as these definitions complement each other. According to Wearing (2001), voluntourism has suffered from not being separated from other forms of tourism or volunteering, but belonging to, i.a., alternative tourism, international volunteering, and social work. Most research, including the pioneering work of Wearing stems from sociological premises but we endeavour a wider, socio-economical perspective without forgetting that tourism as an industry naturally aims at economic results.

The main stakeholders of voluntourism, are the volunteering travellers, the intermediary organizations organizing the trip, and the local community at the destination (Wearing & McGehee, 2013; Bentele, 2023). The most researched aspects of VT seem to be the traveller's motives (Brown, 2005; Siebert & Benson, 2009; Tomazos & Butler, 2010; Mustonen, 2005; Proyrungroj, 2020), forming volunteering-oriented and vacation-oriented travellers (Callanan & Thomas, 2005; Brown, 2005), and transformative effects of VT on travellers (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Bentele, 2023). Some authors insist on weighing some motives as more positive as beneficial than others (Callanan & Thomas, 2005), but from economic perspective it is much more important what is the actual impact, not the initial motivation of the tourists involved (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2022, 367). Although VT is inevitably related to local community (e.g., Wearing & Grabowski, 2011; Bentele, 2023), its regenerative potential for the host community and the destination is underexplored (Wearing & McGehee, 2013; McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Hernandez-Maskivker, Lapointe & Aquino, 2018). The vital role of intermediary organizations, either non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and non-for-profit organizations (NPOs), or tour operators and commercial entities (Pompurová & Marčeková, 2017) for the successful management of VT has only recently been realized (Wearing & McGehee, 2013; McGehee & Andereck, 2008; Bentele, 2023; Pompurová et al., 2020; Hernandez-Maskivker, Lapointe & Aquino, 2018). Online platforms have most recently diversified the spectrum of intermediaries (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2022), introducing less coordinated activity based on direct communication between hosts and travellers. Wearing and McGehee (2013) also identify the potential of social media as a facilitator of unpackaged VT experiences.

Although VT is widely considered sustainable (Bentele, 2023; Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2022; Pompurová et al., 2018), it is related both to benefits and shortcomings. Its positive impact is characterized by transforming traveller's attitudes and behaviour (Coghlan & Gooch, 2011; Bentele 2023; Brown, 2005), spreading awareness of some communities' problems (Bentele, 2023), cultural exchange and new ideas and models (Hernandez-Maskivker, Lapointe & Aquino, 2018), economic benefits for the locals and the destination (Pompurová, Sokolová & Cole, 2020), but at the same time it is criticized for its unethical practices involving orphanage tourism (Birrell, 2010; Van Doore & Nhep, 2023), unequal power dynamics (McGehee & Andereck, 2009; Mohamub, 2013) including saviorism (Bentele, 2023; Baumgarten, 2022), neocolonialism (e.g., Guttentag, 2009; Palacios, 2010), commodification of community's needs and culture (Wearing & McGehee, 2013; (Wearing, Young & Everingham, 2017), reinforcing stereotypes (Mostafanezhad, 2013; Guttentag, 2009; Gharib, 2017), as well as extensive carbon footprint (El Geneidy & Baumeister, 2019), short unimpactful visits (Anderson, Kim & Larios, 2017), low-skilled volunteers (Guttentag, 2009), weakly communicated responsibility benefits (Smith & Font, 2014). As a result of the criticism (Hernandez-Maskivker, Lapointe, & Aquino, 2018), but also because of the multidisciplinary character of VT (McGehee, 2002), many practitioners refrain from associating themselves

with VT, although their activity can be described as such (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2022), which only adds up to the misunderstanding and the poor coordination.

Table 1: Definitions of voluntourism in academic literature

Author	Definition	Perspective
Wearing (2001,1)	"those tourists who, for various reasons, volunteer in an organized way to undertake holidays that might involve aiding or alleviating the material poverty of some groups in society, the restoration of certain environments, or research into aspects of society or environment"	• international voluntourism • development aid • tourists and local community as stakeholders • focus of the trip is volunteering
Brown (2005, 480)	"type of tourism experience where a tour operator offers travellers an opportunity to participate in an optional excursion that has a volunteer component, as well as a cultural exchange with local people"	• tour operator • intermediary organization and tourists as stakeholders • focus of the trip is tourism
McGehee & Santos (2005)	volunteer tourist uses "discretionary time and income to travel out of the sphere of regular activity to assist others in need"	• voluntourist • helping others • volunteer and locals as stakeholders • focus of the trip is volunteering
Wearing, Young & Everingham (2017)	"reframe volunteer tourism away from development aid" "to look at the concept of 'making a difference' not through the lens of 'helping', but through a lens of intercultural understanding and mutuality"	• international voluntourism • purpose of voluntourism
Pompurová, Sokolová & Cole (2020,3)	"a voluntourist as an individual who, in free time, meets the specific need of traveling in order to gain a comprehensive experience, and engages voluntarily, without a claim and reward, in various voluntary activities while staying at a destination (outside usual residence)"	• both domestic and international voluntourism • volunteers as stakeholders • focus both on volunteering and tourism as a "complete experience"
Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen (2022, 367)	"voluntourism is a combination of two sets of values – tourism and volunteerism in coexistence"	• both domestic and international voluntourism • focus both on volunteering and tourism as a socio-economic phenomenon

Wearing, Young, and Everingham (2017) call for a refocusing of VT from development aid towards cultural exchange. Some authors suggest that we might as well need to forget about the tourism aspect and focus on charity to create genuinely positive impact (Anderson, Kim & Larios 2017). In our previous research, we have identified that more examples from VT in developed countries can contribute to its ethics and improve its reputation (Röntynen & Tunkkari-Eskelinen, 2022; Röntynen, 2022). However, this paper concentrates on the possibility of theoretical exploration and transformation of voluntourism by establishing links to other concepts. As Wearing & McGehee (2013, 127) state, "theory will be especially valuable in […] the opportunity for volunteer tourism to create a new paradigm in tourism that places the community at the centre".

3.2 Community-Based Tourism

A plethora of definitions of community-based tourism exists (Dangi & Jamal, 2016, 9), emphasizing different aspects of it and not completely agreeing on its scope and focus (Zielinski et al., 2020; Mtapuri & Giampiccoli, 2018). To summarize, CBT is bottom-up approach that places an emphasis on involving and benefiting local communities in tourism activities, seeking to empower local residents and communities by allowing them to take an active role in tourism development and management. Academic world has not yet reached a consensus on the following matters:

- the scope of locals' involvement in tourism: involvement vs. participation vs. facilitation; ownership vs. management

Is participation in decision-making giving enough benefit to the community or is it just tokenism? Should the tourism be in total control of residents in order to empower them, while external actors and intermediaries take the role of bare facilitators? (Blackstock 2005; Lee & Joo, 2023.)

- the ownership and goals: locally privately-owned vs. community-owned vs. local employment

Should tourism business be owned jointly by the community for it to be community-based or is it enough that its private owner's origin from local community, or alternatively local residents are among the employed (Zielinski et. al, 2020; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012)?

- shared goals vs. shared benefits

Should the tourism-related goals be shared by the community or is it enough that single actor's goals benefit the whole community and lead to its empowerment (Zielinski et. al, 2020)?

Recent literature has seen efforts to formulate frameworks and scales measuring the sustainability of CBT (e.g., Dangi & Jamal, 2016; Wolters, 2021; Naranjo Llupart, 2022), but mostly this tourism approach is seen as sustainable (e.g., Ngo & Creutz, 2022) economically – creating jobs and minimizing economic leakages, socio-

culturally – prioritizing the wellbeing of the community, preserving its cultural heritage, empowering it to take future in its own hands, as well as environmentally – upholding local natural resources of high value for the locals according to the destination's carrying capacity (Mtapuri, Camilleri & Dłużewska, 2021). These sustainability dimensions manifest themselves on a local level (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). Empowerment as a key element of CBT occurs economically (jobs and income), psychologically (community pride and self-esteem), socially (cohesion and wellbeing), and politically (reduction of power and domination relationships in society) (Scheyvens, 1999). CBT relates to other tourism concepts, e.g., ecotourism, fair trade tourism, heritage tourism (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). Pro-poor tourism on the other hand is seen as undesirable direction, affirming neoliberalist, capitalist, and colonialist structures (Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012; Blackstock, 2005).

The primary stakeholders of CBT are the community, tourists, public governmental organizations, and intermediaries. Community is at the centre of this tourism effort but usually is wrongly seen as a homogenous group (Zielinski et al., 2020; Blackstock, 2005). Communities usually engaged in CBT are vulnerable, underprivileged, and prone to marginalization, either coming from developing countries and indigenous peoples, or living in peripheral areas and rural regions (Zielinski et al., 2020; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). They are not self-sufficient and require external funding and additional expertise (Lee & Joo, 2023) to become equal and competitive (Mtapuri, Camilleri & Dłużewska, 2021) in the contexts of tourism. Public agencies oversee tourism-related policies and provide funding; thus they are crucial to the existence and success of CBT (Zielinski et al., 2020; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). Intermediaries, usually non-governmental organizations (NGOs), complement the funding spectrum and facilitate the development process for resource mobilization and capacity building (Lee & Joo, 2023). Diligence should be exercised in cases when the intermediary possesses crucial resources, setting it in a power position (Lee & Joo, 2023; Giampiccoli & Mtapuri, 2012). The tourist as a stakeholder of CBT is rarely discussed. Liang (2022) highlights the active, cocreator role of the visitor before, during, and after the CBT trip, providing meaningfulness and leading to transformative effects and satisfaction both with tourism experience and own life. Tourists in CBT could be both affluent and price-sensitive (Mtapuri, Camilleri & Dłużewska, 2021), which is similar to voluntourism (e.g., Röntynen, 2022). Notably, private sector actors are rare stakeholders of CBT initiatives (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009) – on the one hand, for the risk of shifting resources and benefits away from the community, but on the other hand, resulting at market inadequacy.

Tourists are increasingly attracted to CBT due to the desire for closer relationships with locals and authentic experiences (Mtapuri, Camilleri & Dłużewska, 2021; Zielinski et al., 2020), similar to some motives of voluntourists. Some opt for rural CBT for the pieceful and idyllic characteristics of the countryside as a contraty to hectic urban life, while others seek indigenous and traditional communities to learn new and meet new cultures (Zielinski et al., 2020). Liang (2022) distincts recreational and learning motivations.

CBT's shortcomings include the ephemerality and project character of development assistance (Zielinski et. al, 2020; Goodwin & Santilli, 2009), the lack of tourism expertise of some governments and NGOs, the risk of culture clash between original and newly introduced principles and activities (Zielinski et. al, 2020), negative host-visitor relations (Chatkaewnapanon & Lee, 2022) detachment of the CBT initiatives from relevant markets (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009).

3.3 Regenerative Tourism

Regenerative tourism is an approach that emerged partially as a continuum of other regenerative development concepts (Bellato, Frantzeskaki & Nygaard, 2022; Owen 2007) and partially as an effort to rethink tourism in post-covid-19 times (Cave & Dredge, 2020; Ateljevic, 2020). Like VT and CBT, it is opposed to neoliberal values (Pollock 2019).

It can be argued that RT cannot be universally defined as it is pluriversal in nature: it accounts for the real-world cultural context and is not based on abstractions and reductions (Bellato, Frantzeskaki & Nygaard, 2022). Recently, however, a working definition has been produced, containing the most significant components of RT:

"Regenerative tourism is a transformational approach that aims to fulfil the potential of tourism places to flourish and create net positive effects through increasing the regenerative capacity of human societies and ecosystems. Derived from the ecological worldview, it weaves Indigenous and Western science perspectives and knowledges. Tourism systems are regarded as inseparable from nature and obligated to respect Earth's principles and laws. In addition, regenerative tourism approaches evolve and vary across places over the long term, thereby harmonising practices with the regeneration of nested living systems." (Bellato, Frantzeskaki, & Nygaard, 2022, 9.)

RT goes beyond sustainability – not only minimizing negative but also creating positive impacts, providing not only sustainability but hope (Pollock 2019). The impacts are concrete and local, focusing on the destination (Bellato, Frantzeskaki & Nygaard, 2022). Intention is flourishing and thriving, and not just growth and profit (Pollock 2019; Cave & Dredge, 2020). This challenges the current economic system and urges the coexistence of capitalist, alternative capitalist, and non-capitalist practices, producing cocreated and shared non-monetary value of tourism (in addition to the monetary) and building resilience (Cave & Dredge 2020). Moreover, in RT the worldview is challenged: world is not considered anymore as a machine to be manipulated but as a "living system with consciousness and intelligence" (Pollock, 2019, 5).

RT involves asset management, "making the best use of an organization's assets in order to maximize shareholder value and to provide the best possible return to other stakeholders", otherwise tourism industry is selling cultural and natural assets "off at discount prices" (Pollock, 2019, 3).

Stakeholders of RT have not been explicitly named and described in the literature, as the idea of RT is in inclusion and wide accountability. The primary concern of RT is the destination, its community, culture, and nature, subject to regenerative practices. The other side of tourism, or who and how actually advances regeneration, is only indirectly discussed. From case and other empirical studies (e.g., Cave & Dredge, 2020; Inversini et al., 2023; Duxbury et al., 2021) it can be concluded that further stakeholders include traditional tourism businesses (hotels, activities), NGOs (non-profit activity), governing agencies (imposing regulations affecting tourism), technologies (e.g., platforms), and also the tourists. Tourists' role ranges from spreading awareness through charity and idea exchange to volunteering at the destination. Hussain (2023) argues that only 1% would consciously choose regenerative tourism experiences but it depends on policymakers to motivate and engage the rest 99% for a collective positive impact.

In present RT literature there is more hope than criticism, however some aspects should be handled with caution. Due to its recent development, regenerative tourism needs more context for better understanding and easier practical application (CBI, 2022) to fulfil its promise and "move beyond simply advocating" (Cave & Dredge, 2020, 2). It is not yet clear, where exactly its transformative potential lies (Bellato, Frantzeskaki & Nygaard, 2022). Another shortcoming is that RT as scientific development and practice still largely relies on Western and English-language sources. Indigenous and traditional knowledge should be included in RT's development (Bellato, Frantzeskaki & Nygaard, 2022), since regenerative mindset is "an ancient and traditional way of living" (Hussain, 2023, 2), and the existing alternative economic practices of the Global South should be recognized and utilized (Cave & Dredge, 2020).

4. The Interrelation between Voluntourism, Community-Based Tourism, and Regenerative Tourism

Evidently, all three examined tourism concepts aim at providing alternatives of power, hierarchy, and dependency as features typical for neoliberal structures. None of them, however, provides tourism with panacea, and each comes with its own criticism. We claim that not only voluntourism can be re-imagined as responsible in the context of CBT and RT, but all three approaches complement each other's focus in contributing to tourism's responsibility and overcome its shortcomings with each other's help.

Voluntourism's overly commodification and detachment from genuine needs, as well as its neocolonial practices exploiting the community in the destination, can be overcome by placing its control in the hands of locals who know best how their own needs should approached and whose significant resources are utilized in the process. However, their lack of tourism expertise and networking, as well as the funding shortage can draw them in a vicious cycle of projectifying the tourism efforts into short-term initiatives leaking the economic benefits elsewhere. Thus, regenerative approach is needed to focus the efforts on the destination and push them towards long-term impact. RT with its holistic, hopeful mindset is an attractive approach but the tools for its implementation are yet to be developed. The existing case studies describe some indications of regenerative mindset in the community or on the supply side but, in order to involve visitors and achieve impact, regenerative tourism should offer hands-on transformative experiences, utilizing voluntourism practices. If this interrelation between the studied tourism approaches (presented in Figure 1) gets utilized, this will result in stronger focus on responsibility of all tourism stakeholders.
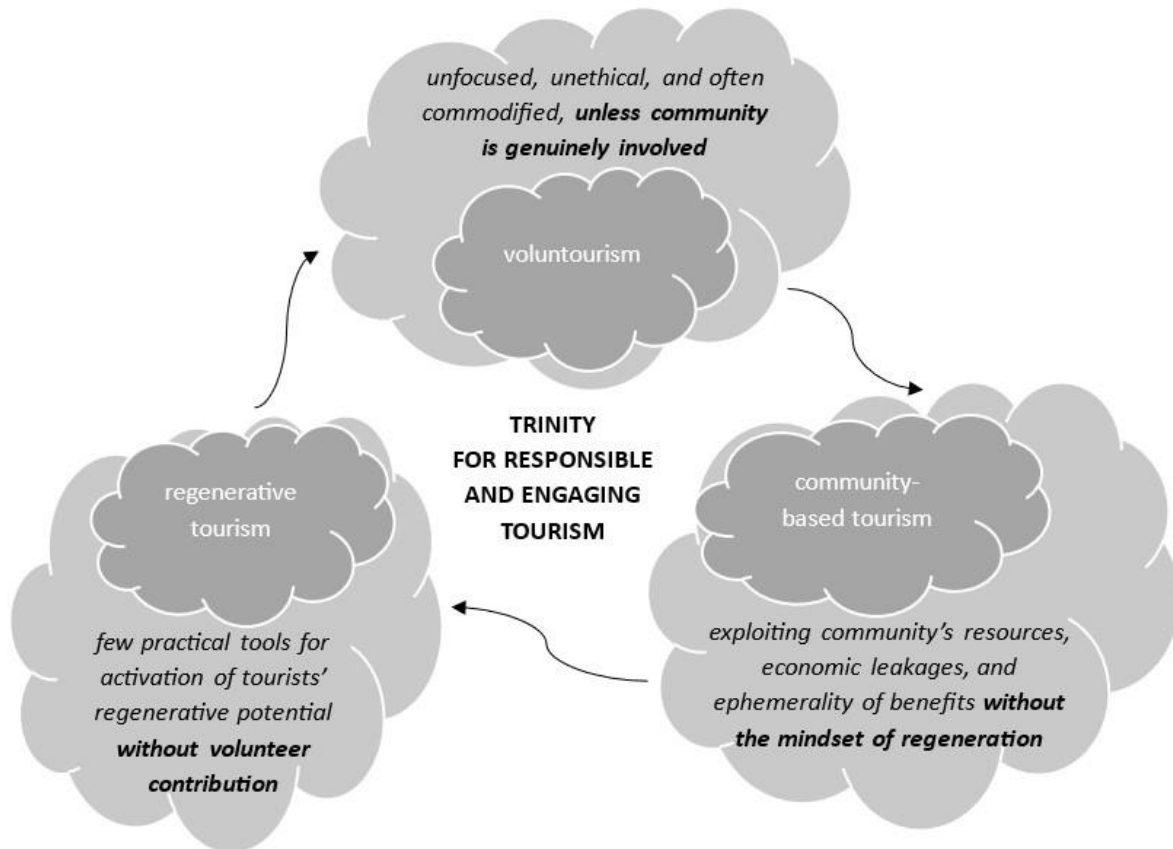
Figure 1: The trinity of voluntourism, CBT, and regenerative tourism for responsible and engaging tourism (figure by the authors)

Moreover, for each stakeholder to be accounted for its responsibility in the process, first the spectrum of stakeholders should be mapped thoroughly. Our literature review synthesized some of the core features of stakeholders in VT, CBT, and RT from direct, but more often indirect indications of their roles and functions. Comparing the characteristics of the three concepts, there is much in common, but also much that could be loaned from each other to broaden the understanding about each paradigm.

5.   Discussion, conclusions, and further directions

This theoretical exploration was provoked by the need for re-imagining voluntourism to give it an opportunity to take more responsible and ethical dimensions. The discovered interrelations between VT, CBT, and RT go far beyond expectations. However, voluntourism retains its central role in the trinity because it provides concrete tools for the functioning of new-age participative, decolonized, responsible tourism. The most familiar challenge has been the ethics within voluntourism, and this can be tackled – at least theoretically evidenced and shown in this paper.

Community together with its residence is the key in each of the concepts. In CBT, the ethicality is in the hands of locals – whether they represent a local authority or are active residents interested in tourism development. Regenerative tourism is the mostly recognized with its ethical purposes, and this also helps voluntourism implementation to consider ethics more concretely. The focus on either volunteering work or tourism in VT is a relevant indicator of the visitors' motives for community impact, but this impact should be achieved by directing volunteers' input in the right direction by other stakeholders. Additionally, CBT is considered ethically sustainable, but the criteria remain unclear.

This study's limitation could be found in its theoretical nature. Empirical studies, observation of cases, and developmental experiments should be undertaken to broaden the trinity framework and enrich the understanding of these tourism approaches. Voluntourism was in the centre of the current exploration, and we have demonstrated its relation to CBT and regenerative tourism. However, regenerative tourism includes a wide

variety of stakeholders. Community-based and volunteer tourism address the involvement of tourism's demand (tourists) and supply (hosts) in regeneration but only grasp the existence of intermediaries and influencers of many kinds. These additional stakeholders and the tools for realizing their regenerative potential should also be studied.

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