Assessment of Stakeholders perception of Bhutan as Meeting and Incentive destination

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ABSTRACT
Meeting and Incentive tourism is a new form of tourism, which is gaining popularity because of the benefits generated. This study focuses on destination planning element of the destination management that involves assessing the potential of developing Bhutan as a Meeting and Incentive destination by effectively consulting relevant stakeholders in tourism industry in Bhutan. These stakeholders were asked to assess the attributes relating to developing Meeting and Incentive tourism in Bhutan. These attributes were identified from the relevant literature carried out for both destination management and MICE. The data collected through interviewing the tourism stakeholders in Bhutan, indicated that amenities and accessibility both in terms of price and connectivity is very important for Bhutan to be positioned as a Meeting and Incentive tourism destination. The findings also provided significant interest from all the stakeholders to develop and promote Meeting and Incentive tourism in Bhutan.

Key Words: Meeting and Incentive Tourism, Tourism policy, Destination attributes.
I. INTRODUCTION

The Meeting, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition (MICE) Industry: Global scenario

The Meetings, Incentives, Conventions and Exhibitions (MICE) industry is a new form of tourism that represents 15% of the global tourism according to the data from UNWTO.

According to the data from International Congress and Convention Association, ICCA, (2002-2011), the number of MICE events held in a year has been growing in the past ten years from 6,155 in 2002 to 10,070 in 2011. Conversely, it is interesting to note that the number of participants per meeting has been decreasing over the years and this trend of international meeting getting smaller still continues. In 2011, 30.2% of all the identified meetings that were organized have received between 50 and 149 participants (ICCA, 2002-2011). This trend not only provides an opportunity but also encourages the emerging destinations with limited infrastructure to participate in hosting such events.

MICE businesses are regarded highly lucrative because of the high revenue potential, as the participants tend to spend more compared to the average traveler (Acolla, 2010, Leiper, McCabe, Poole & Weeks, 2001). MICE industry is associated with bringing in positive economic significance to the developed as well as developing countries mainly because of its insensitive nature to seasonality (Rogers, 2008). It is considered as one of the main drivers for destination development and an important generator of income and employment. Moreover, MICE tourism not only brings economic benefits but also provides a platform for knowledge sharing, networking and capacity building, making it an important driver for intellectual development and regional cooperation. (UNWTO, 2012).

The Meeting, Incentive, Convention and Exhibition (MICE) Industry: Bhutan’s scenario

Understanding the characteristics and benefits of MICE industry for the development of the country, Bhutan took the initiative to develop MICE tourism as a product to counterbalance the issue of seasonality and promote Bhutan as a year round destination.
Since MICE Tourism was recently implemented in Bhutan, there are few initiatives taken by the government to promote Bhutan as a MICE destination such as waiving off the royalty to the participants coming to attend meetings organized by the government and assisting in arranging the logistics for the event.

In response to these initiatives, several international meeting and conferences such as PATA Adventure Travel and Responsible Tourism Conference and Mart 2012, 6th UNWTO Asia/Pacific Executive Training Programme on Tourism Policy and Strategy, 16th SAARC Summit, International GNH conferences, International Women Conference, First Regional Economic Development Conference, ICIMOD Board Meeting and SAARC Environment Ministers Meeting have been hosted in Bhutan, which were organized and managed by different government organizations. Likewise, industrial CEOs meetings, Education fairs and commercial trade fairs have been organized in collaboration with some of the hotels and private industries in Bhutan (Tourism Council of Bhutan Secretariat (TCBS), 2009).

Though there have been numerous meetings held in Bhutan and substantive efforts made to position Bhutan as a MICE destination, it is still in an infant stage and the arrival figure are still not very attractive. The figure below explains the types of visitor arrivals to Bhutan, where the figure of MICE (International Business and Regional High-end Business by air) is relatively low but definitely showing a drastic increase of 68.1% in 2011 (Bhutan Tourism Monitor, 2011). Further indicating that, MICE related travel is growing but is relatively much smaller in numbers and spread, as compared to leisure travel.
**Rationale of the study**

As per the Bhutan Tourism Monitor, 2011 (BTM), visitor perceive Bhutan as a Himalayan Buddhist country with a unique living culture and pristine environment, which provides an opportunity for Bhutan to be promoted as an incentive destination as the incentive travelers would prefer to travel to exclusive destinations since it’s an all-expense paid travel to motivate the employees (Buhalis, 2000; Chiappa, 2012). Moreover, the infrastructure requirement for Incentive tourism is similar to that of the leisure tourism.

Although Bhutan has over the years, hosted several International meeting and Regional Exhibitions, Bhutan still has not been able to attract major demand for MICE travel predominantly because of the lack of appropriate facilities and support services for such travel. There are only few hotels with proper facilities that are suitable for hosting meetings only. As per TCBS, only 33 hotels out of 128 accredited hotel under the hotel classification system has MICE facilities.

It can be said that MICE is not a new concept in Bhutan but requires an in-depth assessment of the existing infrastructure and the stakeholder’s perception of Bhutan as a MICE destination prior to positioning itself as a full-fledged MICE destination. Therefore, this research has been undertaken to primarily assess the Meeting and Incentive Tourism as a product in Bhutan.
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism destination planning: definition and process.

Though there were studies conducted on tourism, researcher started to study tourism planning only from the 1970s (Alipour, 1996). In the words of Dregde et al., (2006), planning is about identifying appropriate steps to achieve some predetermined goal or set of goals and may involve planning for many areas such as infrastructure planning, social planning or business planning with common elements. A similar concept by Inskeep (1994), states that a comprehensive planning enables tourism to be managed and developed in a controlled, integrated and sustainable manner, thus, generating substantial economic benefits to an area, without hampering the environment or creating social problems. Enright and Newton, (2005 & 2004) supports that the destination planning, as a generic business factor determines the competitiveness of a destination that influences the success of the tourism destination in the world. Due to the multifaceted characteristics of tourism industry planning undoubtedly requires to be applied to tourism development (Gunn, 2002).

Tourism planning is a complicated process that requires taking into consideration the involvement and efforts of all stakeholders to provide a realistic and effective guideline for tourism development and management (Coccossis & Constantoglou, 2006). This integrated planning process ensures coordination between all the components of tourism and further, allows tourism to perform much more effectively and generate the desired benefits (Inskeep, 1994) and therefore, can be referred to as interactive or collaborative approach within the planning process (Hall, 1999).

The importance of involving tourism stakeholders in tourism planning.

Many studies have recognized the importance of involving varied stakeholders in tourism destination planning (Araujo & Bramwell, 1999; Ritchie & Sheehan, 2005; Wilde & Cox 2008; Bornhorst, Ritchie & Sheehan, 2010; Haugland et al., 2011). As Edgell’s (1990) asserts that ‘there is no other industry in the economy that is linked to so many diverse and different kinds of products and services as is the tourism industry’ (Wilde & Cox 2008). Pinto & Kastenholz (2011) draws attention to the fact that tourism destination involves many diverse stakeholders delivering different product and services with their own goals and objectives. With these diverse
characteristics, for a destination to be successful in the market, requires coordination and agreement among the varied stakeholders on a set of common strategic goals and willingness to actively participate in an integrated manner. (Haugland et al., 2011). In terms of measuring the destination success, a study conducted by Bornhorst et al., (2010), verified that even if the destination has a very strong mix of tourism products and services, success would not be achieved if there are no support from the local population, thus, emphasizing on collaboration of internal stakeholders as an important factor for a destination to be successful.

The terminology and definition of MICE.
The acronym ‘MICE’ (Meetings, Incentives, Conferences, and Exhibitions or Events) is commonly used worldwide, whereas, ‘Business tourism’ is widely used in Europe and in Australia the industry prefers to refer to it as ‘business events’. While in Canada, the industry refers to it as MC&IT: meetings, conventions and incentive travel. (Rogers, 2008).

According to UNWTO (online), International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA), Meeting Professionals International (MPI) and Reed Travel prefer the term meetings industry to MICE. Therefore, defines it as a trip’s main purpose being business/professional that can be further subdivided into “attending meetings, conferences or congresses, trade fairs and exhibitions” and “other business and professional purposes”. The MICE industry is considered as a part of tourism industry with the principal activity being business and not leisure (McCabe et al., 2000). Similarly, business travel, which is often referred to as MICE, is mainly driven by business prospects for the traveler and normally, in association with an organization at the destination. (Buhalis, 2000).

Bearing in mind the different terminology for MICE, it has become evident that there is no standard definition and the term ‘MICE’ and ‘Convention and Meetings’ are being used interchangeably (McCabe et al., 2000). Nevertheless, the term MICE has been adopted in this research, as it has been widely used in Bhutan. The definition provided by Convention Industry Council, (2005) has been adopted, as the organization states that MICE is an international term used for events industry.

Meeting and Incentive tourism Industry
Since Meeting and Incentive tourism is the main focus of this research, a detailed reading regarding each segment has been further elaborated so as to ensure that the study covers all aspects of Meeting and Incentive tourism.

Meeting tourism as described by Wootton & Stevens, 1995 is the most significant sector of the tourism industry and more sustainable than the leisure tourism. The ICCA, (2000-2011), further segments meeting into Association meeting and Corporate meeting. Association meetings are organized for scientific or professional purposes by Government and non-government organizations such as academic, trade organizations, professional bodies and social groupings. Whereas, Corporate meetings, are internal or external meetings organized by the company to communicate with their staff and distributors. Further, Rogers (2008), alleges that there are significant differences between corporate and association meetings and to grasp the key differences Table 1 below summarizes the characteristics of corporate and association meeting, thus providing a clear distinction.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Corporate Meeting</th>
<th>Association Meeting</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work for ‘for profit’ organizations.</td>
<td>Usually employed by ’not for profit’ organizations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Event decision-making process is often straightforward</td>
<td>Event decision-making process is complex and prolonged.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and rapid.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Events have a relatively short lead-in time.</td>
<td>Events often have a relatively long lead-in time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buyers may organize a wide variety of events.</td>
<td>Buyers often organize a limited number of events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events often have fewer than a hundred delegates.</td>
<td>Events often have hundreds, if not thousands, of delegates.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per head costs are usually relatively high as the</td>
<td>Per head costs are usually relatively low as delegates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>company is paying.</td>
<td>are often paying themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events are organized year round.</td>
<td>Most events take place in spring and</td>
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Xiang & Formica (2006) states that Incentive travel is a useful tool to motivate employees to improve their performance. The memory of the trip strengthens the participants feeling and loyalty towards the employer. (Backman & Shinew, 1995). Incentive travel has been implemented by many businesses because it has proved to increase productivity, sales, company loyalty, retain employees and stimulate teamwork (SITE, 2013). Likewise, an incentive travel reward also assists in changing the behavior and attitude of the employees because it can be educational in nature (Seebaluck, Naidoo & Munhurrun). From a research conducted by SITE (2013), it was revealed that the incentive travel reward has huge positive impact on the performance of the employees, thus, leading to achieving other goals of the company as well. Further, Incentive travel not only benefits the company or the employees but there is also a significant benefit generated for the destination through the use of accommodation, consumption of food and beverage and many other services (Severt & Breiter, 2010).

**Important attributes of a destination for MICE tourism**

With the continued growth in this market segment, the competitions between destinations are increasingly becoming intensive in order to be selected as the location for MICE and as a result of this high competitions, many countries worldwide are continuously developing various meeting venues and facilities. (Draicevic et al., 2012; Ananzeh and Chiu, 2012; DiPietro et al., 2008; McCabe et al., 2000; Oppermann, 1996). Because of the growing intensity of competition, it is necessary for those competing for business to understand the fundamental factors affecting the site selection process for hosting MICE. (Chen, 2006). Meeting destinations, despite the venue where the meeting is being organized requires a lot of peripheral services such as good accessibility, appropriate hospitality and meeting facilities, good tourist attractions and broadly, a unique destination brand which directly or indirectly contributes to the organization of meeting (Chiappa, 2012).

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Most events last two days or less.</th>
<th>autumn. Major events last three or four days.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Delegates’ partners rarely attend.</td>
<td>Delegates’ partners frequently attend.</td>
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selection of a destination to host MICE tourism. For a destination to be selected as the venue for MICE, seven factors such as accessibility, availability of facility, quality of service, affordability, destination image, attractions/entertainment and safety/security have been identified. (Comas & Mocardo, 2005; Taylor & Shortland-Webb, 2003; Chacko & Fenich, 2000; Crouch & Ritchie, 1998; Oppermann & Chon, 1997; as cited in DiPietro et al., 2008; Oppermann, 1996).

**Stakeholders in general for the MICE industry**

For a MICE event to be successful, the involvement of the vast range of stakeholders is the key factor. By mentioning stakeholders, it can be any individual or organization working towards the coordination and management of the MICE event such as government organizations, industry organizations, venues providing different facilities, convention and visitor bureau, professional conference organizers, transport providers, caterers and other support services (McCabe et al., 2000).

However, for the benefit of this study the framework of Swarbrooke & Horner (2001) was examined. The stakeholders have been distinguished into three types such as Demand, Intermediaries and Suppliers.

**Figure 3: The structure of MICE tourism Industry**

Source: Swarbrooke and Horner, 2001
The demand side of MICE industry includes any individual, company or associations and has been framed under customer or consumer. Moreover, the study emphasizes that there is a wide differences between customer and consumer. Customers are any organizations or employers who decides or allows their employee to travel and bears the entire travel cost, whereas, consumers are employees travelling on the cost of the customers. However, the study also points out that a customer or consumer occasionally can be a same person or organization. For example, certain International Association Committee decides the venue for the conference, bear the cost to attend the conference and undertakes the travel, thus, making them consumer and customer.

According to Rogers (2008), suppliers are those who prodvide the facilities required for hosting a MICE event. Rogers (2008), points out that suppliers have increased in number and only few of them are dedicated in providing the required facilities for MICE tourism.

Though the buyers organize most of the events, the use of intermediaries and specialist agencies to plan and manage the event has increasingly become predominant. The clients often pay commission or a fixed fee to these agencies that does all the planning to host an event on behalf of them (Swarbrooke & Horner, 2001).

**Stakeholders of MICE tourism in Bhutan**

Since MICE is a new form of tourism implemented in Bhutan, currently, there are no separate or dedicated stakeholders for this particular segment. The most important stakeholders are:

a) **Government**

In the words of Buhalis (2000), “DMOs tend to be part of the local, regional or national government and have political and legislative power as well as the financial means to manage resources rationally and to ensure that all stakeholders can benefit in the long term”. Similar to the DMOs as explained by Buhalis (2000), Tourism Council of Bhutan Secretariat is a government organization with the responsibilities to plan, formulate and implement tourism policies in consultation with the
stakeholders, regulate and monitor tourism development activities, promote Bhutan as a unique and exotic destination, target new source markets by diversifying and developing new tourism products and maximizing the use of resources and capacities to ensure equal spread of benefits throughout the country, improve the quality of services by developing and upgrading tourism human resources, promote and facilitate private sector investment and increase community participation (10th Five Year Plan, 2008-2013).

b) **Hotels**

In Bhutan, hotels are the most important stakeholders in MICE industry as they provide venue for meeting as well as the accommodation for the delegates. Majority of MICE events held in Bhutan are organized in hotels though most of the hotels lack the required facilities. Hotels in Bhutan are rated on the scale of 1-5 star based on the national star classification system called as “Hotel Star System”. It is mandatory for the tour operators to provide minimum of 3 star accommodations to the guest. As of 2011, there are 128 accredited hotels in Bhutan, out of which 8 hotels fall under the 5 star category, 7 hotels under 4 star category and 40 hotels under 3 star category (BTM, 2011). As per the recent survey carried out by Tourism Council of Bhutan Secretariat, 33 hotels have conference facilities and are able to host meeting with less than 300 participants.

c) **Associations**

Besides the government, some association such as Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO) and Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (BCCI) also organize MICE events.

Association of Bhutanese Tour Operators (ABTO), a non-profit organization founded in 2000 is the official representative of the tour operators in Bhutan. ABTO works closely with TCBS in implementing any changes that is good for the tourism industry. ABTO has hosted several meetings and training programs for its members (ABTO, 2013).

Bhutan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (BCCI), is also a non-profit organization comprising of business communities for the development of private sector. BCCI has so far hosted only trade fairs and exhibitions such as Bhutan International Trade Fair, Bhutan Construction Expo and has also assisted the private business sector of Bhutan to participate in exhibitions outside Bhutan. However, it should be noted that trade fairs and exhibition organized and participated by BCCI are
all in the regional market (BCCI, 2013).

d) **DrukAir Corporation Limited**

With regard to air transport, Bhutan has only one airline operating in Bhutan and it connects 9 major cities in South Asia. The national airline, Drukair is a government owned company managed by Druk Holding Investment. (DrukAir, 2013)

### III. METHODS

An Exploratory study with a qualitative approach was undertaken. This study is exploratory in nature because very limited information on MICE, particularly Meeting and Incentive tourism is available pertaining to Bhutan. Therefore, it allows the researcher to understand the situation and problems better (Sekaran & Bougie, 2009). Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted to gather data from Hotels, Local Tour Operators, Associations and the relevant Government Organizations.

The data collected was analysed using content analysis as it is a method to analyze recordings of interviews (Sekaran & Bougie 2009). The responses were coded into categories derived from the review of the literature so as to ensure that the data are reliable and valid. The codes adopted from the literature review are as follows (Ananzeh & Chiu, 2012; Buhalis, 2000):

1. **Amenities**: sufficient facilities for conventions and exhibitions, and meeting room facilities as well as its ability to have certain basic services such as fire, police, water, etc.
2. **Accessibility**: refers to the level of ease with which attendees can travel to and from the event site taking into consideration the time and effort.
3. **Accountability**: refers to the ability of the host destination to provide overall quality to MICE tourism participants in terms of Visa, customs, telecommunications, health care, and qualified employees.
4. **Affordability**: refers to the overall price or cost of participating in an event.
5. **Attractions**: refers to the ability of the host destination to provide meeting attendees with attractions and places of interest.
6. **Activities**: refers to recreational activities before, during and after the meeting event.

### IV. RESULTS

*Profile of respondents*
Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in meeting and incentive industry in Bhutan. These include:

- 7 tour operators who have previous experiences handling meeting and incentive tours
- 13 General Managers or Managers of hotels
- 2 directors and 1 senior officer with more than 5 years of working experience in the government organization were interviewed
- 2 Executive Directors from the Associations

After the 25th interview, no further interviews were conducted because the responses given were all similar, thus, indicating that the data had reached a saturation point.

**The Current Situation of Meeting and Incentive Tourism in Bhutan**

The findings indicated that Meeting and Incentive tourism is being carried out but at a very small scale predominantly because of limited infrastructure and airline capacity. Presently, Organizations within Bhutan are the most important client for the hotels for meetings, as mentioned by majority of the respondents that they have hosted meetings for government organizations, international organizations working in Bhutan and other development partners of Bhutan. The meetings and Incentive tours currently hosted or organized for companies outside Bhutan are mostly from India. Majority of the respondents mentioned that such events are not being promoted but are being organized as and when there is a request. Many stated that the website is the only promotion tool they use to promote Meeting and Incentive tourism. In order to develop and promote Bhutan as a Meeting and Incentive destination, the government organizations are providing certain incentives to the private sectors. Although, development of Meeting and Incentive tourism in Bhutan has been accorded high priority, majority of the respondents stated that nothing much has been done for its development. Though government has been spending huge amount of money in marketing and promoting Bhutan, Meeting and Incentive has not been mentioned in any of the promotion activities. Therefore, making Bhutan’s positioning very weak and not visible in the general MICE market.

From the interviews conducted it was obvious that there is lot to be done with regard to the development and promotion of Meeting and Incentive tourism.
Perception of stakeholders on Bhutan as a Meeting and Incentive Destination

It was unanimously mentioned that Bhutan has a very good potential to be developed as Meeting and Incentive Destination. There were huge interests from the respondents to develop and promote such events mainly because of the impact on the economy. Respondents mentioned that there is huge direct impact on the tourism growth plus the indirect benefits. Moreover, the benefit is not just in tourism, it is related to business development and diplomatic relations.

Amenities and Accessibility both in terms of price and connectivity are an important factor for the development of such events. According to the respondents, Bhutan being rated as one of the best destination with pristine environment, vibrant culture, hospitable people, political stability, safety and security and most importantly the Gross National Happiness philosophy are the main attributes that attracts such events to be held in Bhutan. There was a universal acceptance from the respondents that Bhutan is not at all expensive. With the all-inclusive package for USD 250 per day, the guest are provided with accommodation, three meals, local transportation and a guide, however, many felt that getting to Bhutan was expensive mainly due to the high fare of airline. The cost of the air tickets sometimes outweighs the desire of the people to come to Bhutan. Though people want to come to Bhutan, when they add up the daily minimum tariff with the cost of the air tickets. It becomes very expensive for them. Though there are enough activities for the delegates to engage in during their stay in Bhutan, improvement would still be required so that the delegates could be provided with more options. However, with regard to the Accountability, majority of the respondents expressed concern that there is lack of professionalism in the service industries, which needs improvement.

In addition, respondents exerted that such tourism should be promoted during the off-season because tourism in Bhutan is very seasonal and the business during the off-season is very low. Moreover, during the peak season, the respondents feel that it is very difficult to cater to such tourist because the infrastructure will not be sufficient.

The challenges to develop Meeting and Incentive tourism in Bhutan

Lack of proper convention facilities, the capacity of the hotels, accessibility both in terms of price and connectivity and lack of professional firms to cater to such events
were major challenges identified from the interview. Respondents pointed out that if the infrastructure does not improve then there would definitely be infrastructure constraints and if it happens during peak season it would definitely be a big challenge. These are challenges if such events take place right now but over time this will level out and there will be adequate capacity and facilities.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The recommendations provided in order to position Bhutan as a Meeting and Incentive destination were to partner up with top MICE handlers and have PR agents in those destinations where such tours are aggressively promoted. Promotion to be carried out in partnership with the stakeholders. Encourage the organizers to host such events during the lean-season only. Government to provide incentives to the private sectors in order to attract such tourist. Provide training to enhance the skills of the staff in the hospitality industry. Further, the development of infrastructure and increase in the accessibility were some areas for improvement. Finally, streamlining the rules and regulation of the government would encourage the tour operators and hotels to work towards enhancing the image of Bhutan as a Meeting and Incentive destination.

In conclusion, Meeting and Incentive tourism is considered as an important sector in the development of Bhutan’s tourism industry. Bhutan is highlighted on the globe for being a country of GNH, the country of happiness where there is peace and tranquility. Meeting and Incentive tourism is doable but at the moment there is no right infrastructure but in the medium and long term it would be possible because there are a lot other factors, which can make Bhutan as a Meeting and Incentive Destination especially for Corporate Sectors/Institutions. Moreover, with the building of the convention center and many new hotels along with the improvement in accessibility would boost Meeting and Incentive tourism and Bhutan can be an attractive Meeting and Incentive Destination.

However, TCBS needs to take a consolidated and holistic view because at the moment Meeting and Incentive tourism promotion at a micro level is being happening. Therefore, TCBS should create a common positioning of Bhutan for global MICE market.
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