Exploring Social Entrepreneurship in Birdwatching-Based Ecotourism: A Delphi Study of a Birdwatching NGO, IRAN

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a qualitative study based on the Delphi technique on the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society in Iran to explore social entrepreneurship strategies in birdwatching-based ecotourism. Utilizing semi-structured interviews with eight experts from the sector, the research identifies critical approaches like community involvement, educational initiatives, and collaborative efforts with stakeholders. The findings highlight innovative strategies such as diversified birdwatching tours and local and international expertise integration. Challenges include funding, logistical constraints, and balancing ecological conservation with economic development. The study contributes to understanding the role of NGOs in sustainable tourism, offering insights for similar initiatives globally. It underscores the importance of community engagement and multi-stakeholder collaboration in promoting sustainable ecotourism practices.

Keywords: Social Entrepreneurship, Birdwatching, Ecotourism, Delphi Study

Kuş Gözlemciliğine Dayalı Ekoturizmde Sosyal Girişimciliğin Keşfi: İran'da Kuş Gözlemciliği Yapan Bir STK Üzerine Yapılan Delphi Çalışması

ÖZET

Bu çalışma, kuş gözlemciliğine dayalı ekoturizmde sosyal girişimcilik stratejilerini keşfetmek için İran'daki AvayeBoom Kuşları Koruma Derneği üzerine nitel bir Delphi çalışması sunmaktadır. Sektörden sekiz uzmanla yapılan yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmelerden faydalanan araştırma, toplum katılımı, eğitim girişimleri ve paydaşlarla işbirliği çabaları gibi kritik yaklaşımları tanımlamaktadır. Bulgular, çeşitlendirilmiş kuş gözlem turları ve yerel ve uluslararası uzmanlık entegrasyonu gibi yenilikçi stratejileri vurgulamaktadır. Karşılaşılan zorluklar arasında finansman, lojistik kısıtlamalar ve ekolojik koruma ile ekonomik kalkınmanın dengelenmesi yer almaktadır. Çalışma, STK'ların sürdürülebilir turizmdeki rolünün anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunmakta ve küresel ölçekteki benzer girişimler için içgörüler sunmaktadır. Sürdürülebilir ekoturizm uygulamalarının teşvik edilmesinde toplum katılımının ve çok paydaşlı işbirliğinin önemini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Sosyal Girişimcilik, Kuş Gözlemciliği, Ekoturizm, Delfi Tekniği

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the ever-evolving tourism industry has highlighted the necessity for sustainable strategies, ensuring its persistent relevance and success in the dynamic global landscape (Aquinto et al., 2018). The emergence of social entrepreneurship as an influential blend of economic proliferation and societal value creation has caught the attention. This approach amplifies economic dimensions and creates a meaningful social impact, especially in an era where populations proliferate, and organizations fiercely compete (Yan & Zhang, 2022). Its inception during the 1970s was an answer to the shortcomings of consumer demand management. Over time, multifaceted interpretations by scholars have enriched our understanding of entrepreneurship. For instance, Schumpeter, back in 1934, promoted it as an innovation-driven process within an entity, evolving later into a comprehensive mindset prevalent in both corporates and non-profits (Dollinger, 2008; Dees, 2001).

In the vast expanse of entrepreneurial narratives, one that resonates deeply with contemporary concerns is its role in tourism, especially with the escalating emphasis on sustainable growth in political and social narratives (Méndez-Picazo et al., 2021). With their indigenous wisdom and practices, local communities have often spearheaded pioneering entrepreneurial initiatives in tourism, signaling a fresh era where inclusivity and sustainability reign supreme (Aquinto et al., 2018).

NGOs have emerged as pivotal players in this time, innovating change, bridging gaps, and facilitating sustainable endeavors in ecotourism zones (Scherl et al., 2004). Their endeavors encompass conservation, community empowerment, and sustainable practices, drawing a roadmap for social entrepreneurship's footprints in ecotourism (Buckley et al., 2001). At its core, this article delves deep into the details of social entrepreneurship within birdwatching-centric ecotourism, focusing on the Avayeboom Conservation Society in Iran. By employing the Delphi methodology, this study seeks to collect insights from diverse stakeholders, resolving NGOs' challenges and prospects as they strive to infuse social entrepreneurship into ecotourism paradigms.

2. Theoretical Background

In recent years, integrating social entrepreneurship into various sectors, including tourism and ecotourism, has emerged as a transformative approach to addressing social challenges while promoting sustainable development. Social entrepreneurship involves innovative strategies beyond profit generation to create positive change and bring about systemic transformation in society. The literature in this study aims to explores social entrepreneurship in tourism and ecotourism, explicitly focusing on the importance of NGOs, nature-based concerns, and the enterprises of the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society in Iran.

2.1. Social Entrepreneurship

Social entrepreneurship, a concept that has gained significant attention in the past decades, represents an intersection of business strategies and social objectives. Grounded in the collective desire to address and mitigate societal challenges through entrepreneurial, the concept is often associated with organizations and individuals who work to create positive change in society through innovative and sustainable approaches.

Martin and Osberg (2007) argue that for a clear understanding of the field, there is a need for a definitive explanation of what establishes social entrepreneurship. According to them, social entrepreneurship occurs when a particular gap or balance failure in the societal structure is

identified and then systematically challenged by introducing innovative approaches, thereby bringing a transformative benefit to society. This underlines the main difference between social entrepreneurship and other forms of entrepreneurship: the former targets systemic change and societal transformation, while the latter often targets market gaps for profit.

However, Peredo & McLean (2006) noted that despite its emerging popularity, there is a scope of interpretations regarding what truly embodies social entrepreneurship. The varying interpretations of the term stem from the diverse contexts in which it is practiced and the myriad societal challenges it addresses. Their review reveals that social entrepreneurship aims to create social value by providing innovative solutions to significant social problems. While the nature of these problems can be diverse, from healthcare to education to environmental conservation, the underlying objective remains to create value for society.

Haugh (2005) called for a structured research agenda for social entrepreneurship, emphasizing that recognizing its multifaceted nature is critical. Her study notes that while the domain borrows heavily from traditional entrepreneurship regarding strategy and innovation, its success metrics are not solely rooted in profit generation. Instead, the success of a social entrepreneurial venture is judged by the social impact and transformation it brings about.

Diving further into the specifics, Certo & Miller (2008) highlighted the key issues and concepts in the domain. They acknowledged the inherent challenge of defining and identifying social entrepreneurial ventures, given that their objectives span both for-profit and non-profit spectrums. Their work draws attention to the necessity of understanding the core motivations, strategies, and impact measurements that distinguish social entrepreneurs from their traditional counterparts.

Sullivan Mort, Weerawardena, & Carnegie (2003) moved towards conceptualizing social entrepreneurship by focusing on its differentiating factors. They pointed out that the unique blend of mission-driven character combined with innovative strategies defines this realm. Moreover, they proposed that the true essence of social entrepreneurship lies in its mission to create and sustain social value rather than personal and stakeholder wealth, which dominates traditional entrepreneurial ventures.

Lastly, Short, Moss, & Lumpkin (2009), in their review of research in the field, emphasized the contributions made so far and the areas where future research could further solve the complexity of social entrepreneurship. They argue that while the past has provided significant insights into the motivations and challenges of social entrepreneurs, future research avenues should delve deeper into understanding the scalability, sustainability, and systemic impact of such ventures.

Connecting these theoretical constructs to the article's context demonstrates an evident union of ecological preservation and social enterprise. Birdwatching-based ecotourism represents an innovative approach to conserving biodiversity while promoting socio-economic development in local communities. Given the rich avian diversity in regions like Iran, tapping into birdwatching ecotourism can be seen as a social entrepreneurial venture. Such an effort addresses the environmental balance failure Martin & Osberg (2007) mentioned and aligns with the broader objective of creating societal value, as Peredo & McLean (2006) outlined.

Social entrepreneurship represents a mission-driven approach to societal problems, leveraging innovative strategies to bring about change. As highlighted by the various authors, the multiple interpretations of the term underscore its adaptability and relevance across diverse challenges and contexts, including birdwatching-based ecotourism in Iran. The endeavor's success,

in this context, would be measured by its impact on conservation efforts and the socio-economic upliftment of the local community, staying true to the essence of social entrepreneurship.

2.2. Social Entrepreneurship in Tourism and Ecotourism

The concept of Tourism Social Entrepreneurship (TSE) has gained prominence over the last decade, emphasizing a fusion of tourism with social objectives and sustainable practices. This integration catalyzes sustainable community development, encouraging the careful promotion and management of tourist activities. Building upon this premise, this section delves into the theoretical foundations of TSE, particularly within the focus on birdwatching-based ecotourism, drawing inspiration from the Avayeboom Bird Conservation Society in Iran.

Aquino et al. (2018) present a conceptual framework where TSE is portrayed as a channel for sustainable community development. The linking of tourism and social entrepreneurship amplifies the potential of both sectors to generate economic, social, and environmental benefits. At its core, TSE provides a holistic approach wherein community well-being is prioritized, and sustainable practices are spread. This fits the essence of birdwatching-based ecotourism, which emphasizes conservation, education, and community involvement. As a niche tourism sector, birdwatching thrives on preserving natural habitats and showcasing avian biodiversity, making it suitable for TSE endeavors.

Sheldon and Daniele (2017) clarify the cooperative relationship between social entrepreneurship and tourism. In their research, tourism is positioned not merely as an economic activity but as an opportunity for social impact and innovation. This view emphasizes the power of entrepreneurial strategies in the tourism sector, promoting sustainable practices and community benefits. They suggest that the fusion of social entrepreneurship principles with tourism offers a transformative approach that benefits tourists and local communities. For birdwatching enthusiasts, such an integration ensures their activities have minimal ecological footprints while maximizing their expeditions' educational and experiential value.

Delving further into the mechanics of TSE, Laeis & Lemke (2016) advocate for applying the sustainable livelihoods approach. This methodology prioritizes local communities, ensuring their participation and benefiting from tourism-related initiatives. It is a framework that encourages tourism practitioners to understand and harness community resources, ensuring long-term sustainability. It seems birdwatching-based ecotourism, could translate to community-led guided tours, local techniques showcasing avian themes, or conservation workshops. The AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society, with its roots in Iran, believes that can help through this approach, demonstrating that community involvement enhances the preservation and appreciation of local bird species.

Moreover, De Lange & Dodds (2017) highlight the potential of TSE as a pathway to increased sustainable tourism. They argue that social entrepreneurship can reinvent conventional tourism paradigms by focusing on holistic benefits and community-driven change. For birdwatching-based ecotourism, this could mean a more integrated and immersive experience for tourists, emphasizing not just the viewing of birds but understanding their habitats, local cultures, and conservation needs.

Jørgensen et al. (2021) introduce the notion of collective tourism social entrepreneurship. This approach accentuates the power of collective action in TSE, emphasizing community mobilization and social transformation. Such collective endeavors could be compelling in birdwatching-based ecotourism, where community-driven initiatives can significantly enhance

conservation efforts, improve tourist experiences, and ensure equitable benefits for all stakeholders. Scholars indicate that tourism social entrepreneurship holds transformative potential for the tourism sector and birdwatching-based ecotourism. It carves a pathway for sustainable and community-driven initiatives, ensuring the environment and local communities thrive. The Avayeboom Conservation Society stands as a living testament to these principles, showcasing the profound impact of TSE when aptly integrated with ecotourism endeavors. Ecotourism is not a novel concept, with numerous studies focusing on its potential impacts and benefits, especially in conservation and community development (Ties, 2001). The intersection of social entrepreneurship with ecotourism presents a unique paradigm wherein conservation objectives are combined with entrepreneurial activities, potentially fostering sustainable models of destination planning and community engagement (Swarbrooke, 1999).

A study by Parrish (2010) has observed that the commitment of such entrepreneurs to environmental and social causes often propels them to pioneer innovative ventures, integrating business intelligence with ecotourism objectives. The scenario in AvayeBoom, as illustrated by the present study, seems to echo this observation, emphasizing the importance of harnessing indigenous knowledge, stakeholder engagement, and local resources to foster sustainable ecotourism initiatives.

Birdwatching, a niche ecotourism segment, has gained prominence recently, especially in areas with avian diversity. Steven et al. (2015) posits that birdwatching contributes to local economies and promotes conservation efforts, as enthusiasts are often ecologically sensitive and aware. This perspective aligns with the endeavors of the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society, underscoring the symbiotic relationship between avian conservation and ecotourism.

Hvenegaard (1994) delves into the socio-economic benefits of birdwatching tourism, citing how it spurs local employment, crafts industry, and infrastructural development, thus integrating it into a broader tourism framework. The alignment of birdwatching with social entrepreneurship, as Avayeboom demonstrates, offers a blueprint for other conservation societies to model, leveraging the inherent advantages of niche tourism.

Effective destination planning is pivotal for the success of ecotourism ventures. According to Butler (1999), sustainable tourism, including ecotourism, pivots upon thorough planning, wherein environmental, socio-cultural, and economic considerations are weighed holistically. As promulgated by Reed (2008), the participatory planning approach embodies an inclusive process, engaging a myriad of stakeholders, from local communities to governmental entities.

The socio-political landscape, rich natural resources, and cultural heritage necessitate an advocated approach to destination planning (Leigh et al., 2013), incorporating traditional knowledge systems and community-based models. As presented in the study, the Avayeboom Conservation Society's endeavors seem to resonate with these principles, adopting a grassroots approach to birdwatching-based ecotourism.

2.3. The Role of NGOs in Social Entrepreneurship

NGOs are considered a solution for addressing social issues as they fill a gap not adequately addressed by governments or the private sector (Rhoden, 2014). An NGO is an organization that is neither part of a government nor a conventional for-profit business, usually established by ordinary citizens (Reibaldi & Grimard, 2015). The term NGO was first used in the UN Charter, which was approved in 1945. The rise of NGOs was prompted by progressive globalization and the increasing transboundary nature of humanity's most pressing social and economic problems (Reibaldi &

Grimard, 2015). NGOs are gateways to economic creativity, public participation, and social progress or as suitable alternatives for national-level public services (Naderi et al., 2020). Many NGOs have become more aggressive in their fundraising strategies to attract additional funding.

Furthermore, funding is necessary for an NGO's online success due to the high costs of developing and maintaining a good website (Rhoden, 2014). NGOs could play a crucial role in the development process by providing support services for aspiring entrepreneurs, thereby increasing new business success rates and stimulating entrepreneurship (El Chaarani & Raimi, 2021). Several market entry barriers prevent social enterprises from exploiting market opportunities, including value-based obstacles (such as ethical value, growth philosophy, and political value), socio-economic barriers (such as access to finance and human capital), institutional barriers (such as consumer culture) and not understanding or being able to meet existing standards. Such barriers may limit the attempts to expand social enterprises. Low public perception of social enterprises involves insufficient public understanding and knowledge of the role of social enterprises. When compared to conventional enterprises, public perception is much lower, and as a result, the potential of the social enterprise sector may need to be understood by the public. In short, the social enterprise sector needs to be prominent or well-defined in the public eye (Armitage et al., 2020).

2.4. The Research Area

The AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society, located in Isfahan, Iran, has been attempting since July 2015 to promote environmental awareness, advance birdwatching, rehabilitate birds, and initiate educational and executive projects related to avian life. This society underlines the importance of familiarizing all societal sections with the environment. The belief of this society is that effective contact with nature can only be established when approached correctly (AvayeBoom, 2023)

The society's objectives encompass introducing the community to birdwatching, emphasizing the significance of birds, and addressing crucial avian-related matters. Their efforts are directed towards enhancing public understanding, thereby aiding avian conservation in Iran. Operating across multiple Iranian regions, the society identifies local bird enthusiasts and professionals. Through hands-on research, they determine regional avian challenges, selecting issues they are equipped to address. Their strategy incorporates both domestic and global collaborations, ensuring community participation.

The society's operations are divided into four major divisions (AvayeBoom, 2023):

1. Education: Engages in imparting bird-related knowledge to institutions and associations, utilizing internal and external expert resources.

2. Rehab Center: Concentrates on avian treatment and release, coordinating its actions with environmental entities.

3. Executive: Oversees the execution of domestic and international projects that bear relevance to birds.

4. Birdwatching: A non-profit segment, it propels birdwatching culture, offering diverse programs like urban park birdwatching and tournaments.

With collaborative efforts, the AvayeBoom Society has initiated projects in various Iranian provinces, including Isfahan and Khuzestan. Recognizing the potential of international partnerships, they are keen on expanding their global network. According to a report by PARMA

(the information website of the Department of Environment of Isfahan), in 2023, the National Environmental Award for efforts in land conservation was granted by the Iranian Department of Environment to the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society due to its endeavors over the eight years of establishment. Also, in 2022, this NGO was recognized as the best environment entity in Isfahan, Iran (www.isfahan-doe.ir, 2023).

The study aims to evaluate the social entrepreneurship approaches and strategies for developing birdwatching ecotourism using the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society in Iran as a case study. The relationship between ecotourism and social entrepreneurship has grown more pronounced in the evolving landscape of sustainable tourism. Mair and Marti (2006) state that social entrepreneurship is about confronting social challenges through innovative entrepreneurial solutions. The ecotourism field represents a delicate balance, aiming at both environmental preservation and the socio-economic upliftment of local communities (Scheyvens, 1999). This complex dynamic is especially significant when examining organizations like the Avayeboom Bird Conservation Society in Iran, a region bursting with biodiversity and cultural hints but often under-represented in broader ecotourism dialogues.

Continuing, the concept of destination development comes to the forefront. Butler (1980) masterfully presents how tourist destinations disappear and flow over time, shaped by elements ranging from fluctuating market demands to change in infrastructure and policies. To achieve a vision of sustainable destination development, it is vital that base strategies harmoniously align with broader developmental objectives (Swarbrooke, 1999). This symbiosis ensures that local initiatives while addressing immediate concerns, contribute to the larger tapestry of sustainable tourism development.

This inquiry further delves into the implications of these strategies on broader tourism development. The inclusion of Butler (1980) and Swarbrooke (1999) in our theoretical framework underscores the dynamic interplay between local initiatives and broader tourism development goals. This perspective improves the understanding of how localized actions by groups like NGOs contribute to and harmonize with larger sustainable tourism narratives. Thus, given this background, two questions arise:

1. How does the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society employ the key strategies through social entrepreneurship to enhance birdwatching-based ecotourism, thereby contributing to destination development?

2. How do the involvement and strategies of the AvayeBoom Conservation Society align with broader destination development goals?

3. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research approach, focusing on the complex relationship of social entrepreneurship in birdwatching-based ecotourism. Emphasis is placed on understanding NGOs' diverse strategies, such as The Avayeboom Bird Conservation Society.

In this study, a descriptive analysis was conducted to interpret the findings from the Delphi rounds. As Neuman (2013) detailed, this approach involved systematically reviewing and categorizing the data to describe the prevalent themes and patterns. After each Delphi round, the gathered responses were carefully analyzed to identify critical strategies and viewpoints expressed

by the participants. This process involved categorizing responses, highlighting recurrent ideas, and noting emerging patterns.

The Delphi Technique is integrated for its systematic process of putting merging expert opinions together. Delphi Technique is a methodical approach employed to ask for opinions from specialists (Sourani & Sohail, 2015). It allows scholars to study potential occurrences in specific research areas by analyzing data reviewed by experienced experts from the relevant sector to reach a final judgment. This research will employ a Delphi study design to gain insight into the social entrepreneurship strategies utilized by the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society to foster birdwatching-based ecotourism. Delphi research typically encompasses three primary phases: exploration, refinement, and application, which further highlight the aspects of preparation, convergence, and agreement. This technique is employed across various fields such as health, government, societal, ecological, and recreational studies and in commercial and manufacturing investigations (Konu, 2015). This method is a repeating, multi-stage process designed to transform opinion into group agreement and is frequently used in social science research when definitive information is unavailable (Hsu & Sandford, 2007).

Each stage allows participants to express their perspectives, subsequently providing feedback that encapsulates fresh insights and reflects the larger group's viewpoint (Sourani & Sohail, 2015). One of the distinctive attributes of this method is its emphasis on regulated feedback. This ensures that discussions remain within the research's objectives, preventing unwarranted variations into individualistic debates. Such a regulated approach is instrumental in averting a rush towards an impulsive consensus, ensuring a more profound exploration of insights. Table 1 provides an overview of the Delphi technique employed in this research, detailing the stages.

Table 1. Delphi Stages

Round 1	Procedures
Expert Panel Selection	Choosing eight experts from the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society's core members
Round one pilot semi-structured interview	Conduct a pilot interview with one of the experts and develop the final interview questions
The actual survey in round one	face-to-face semi-structured interviews in Iran with experts and writing transcripts happened conversations
Round one data analysis	Using thematic analysis to get codes of the result of the first round
Round 2	Procedures
Round two pilot semi-structured interview	Conduct a pilot interview with the result of round one utilizes them with one of the experts and develop the final interview questions
The actual survey in round two	Online semi-structured interviews on WhatsApp voice calls with experts and writing transcripts happened conversations
Round two data analysis	Using thematic analysis to get codes of the results of the first two

Choosing the Delphi technique was rooted in numerous reasons, pivoting primarily on its suitability to explore niche areas like social entrepreneurship within birdwatching-based ecotourism. Given that this domain intersects between eco-conservation, tourism management, and entrepreneurial dynamics, accessing a pool of experts from the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation

Society in Iran offered an unparalleled depth of insights. With its iterative and feedback-driven approach, the Delphi method proved to be the ideal means to tap into these insights, fostering a richer exploration that might remain abstract in more conventional research methods (Hsu & Sandford, 2007). Additionally, the technique's structured yet flexible design perfectly resonates with the objectives of our study. Its natural design, which prioritizes expert opinions and methodically synthesizes diverse views into consensus-based outcomes, was believed to be fitting to capture the multifaceted dimensions of the research theme (Sourani & Sohail, 2015). Thus, this methodology not only aligned with the explorative objective but also promised a depth and structure that the research aim warranted (Hsu & Sandford, 2019).

3.1. Expert Panel Selection

An intriguing component of the Delphi method is the selection of its expert panel. Given the reliance on expert opinions, panelist selection criteria cannot be overemphasized. Generally, an expert is perceived as someone possessing profound knowledge of a specific subject (Martino, 1983). Literature provides varied opinions on the number of experts that should constitute a Delphi panel. However, a consistent theme is the emphasis on the quality and relevance of expertise rather than sheer quantity. Studies often agree that having seven to eight experts offers a balanced and profound perspective, ensuring diversity of opinions and manageability in data collection and analysis (Weidman et al., 2011).

Furthermore, Linstone and Turoff (1975) highlighted that the real strength of the Delphi method is not just in the number of experts but in the quality of their expertise and their ability to provide diverse yet informed judgments. Given these considerations, a panel of eight experts from the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society was selected for our study. The choice was grounded in more profound reasoning and not merely based on the recommended numbers. These selected individuals have showcased their dedication and commitment by being part of the NGO from its growing stages, supporting it from its inception, and playing pivotal roles over the past eight years of the NGO construction. Their sustained association reflects not just loyalty but a depth of knowledge, experiential learning, and an understanding of the organization's triumphs and challenges. Table 2 demonstrates the panel experts' demographic and interview information.

Table 2. Panel Expert Demographics and Interview details

Experts	Age	Gender	Education	Their position in the NGO	Years of experience	Interview Place	Interview Time
E1	30	Male	Master of Psychology	Founder and CEO	Since 2016	AvyeBoom Office	40 Mins
E2	28	Female	Bachelor of Tourism Management	Event Planner	Since 2016	AvyeBoom Office	30 Mins
E3	34	Female	Master of Agricultural Engineering	Financial Coordinator	Since 2017	AvyeBoom Office	35 Mins
E4	35	Female	Master of Environmental Education	Education Coordinator	Since 2018	AvyeBoom Office	25 Mins
E5	52	Male	Undergraduate	Rehabilitation Center Coordinator	Since 2016	AvyeBoom Office	30 Mins

E6	30	Male	Bachelor of Electronic Engineering	Public Relation Coordinator	Since 2020	AvyeBoom Office	25 Mins
E7	24	Male	Master of Environmental Engineering	Project expert	Since 2020	AvyeBoom Office	17 Mins
E8	29	Female	Master of Tourism Management	Translator	Since 2019	AvyeBoom Office	30 Mins

Four criteria for proficiency have been identified: familiarity and understanding of the subjects being studied, readiness and ability to engage, adequate time for involvement, and strong interpersonal communication abilities (Konu, 2015). The experience of these experts is remarkably divisive. Their leadership roles in organizing birdwatching tours and their hands-on volunteering experiences have given them a unique skill set and knowledge base besides other volunteering and institutional experience. This is not just about the details of birdwatching but also about the delicate balance of ecotourism and its sustainable integration with social entrepreneurship. In essence, these experts are not just observers but active participants and shapers of the journey of the AvayeBoom Conservation Society, which is anonymous in implementing to Delphi's principles.

3.2. Data Collection and Analysis

While the literature is vast and presents limited guidance on the type of discussions suitable for the Delphi process, debates linger on the structural degree of these discussions (Sourani & Sohail, 2015). However, compatibility with structured and semi-structured discussions has been established, making it flexible. This study chose semi-structured interviews, given their flexibility and depth. Some research endeavors have even demonstrated integrating diverse techniques within a singular Delphi investigation—the two-round cyclic Delphi method aimed to locate the strategies through birdwatching-based ecotourism in social entrepreneurship. The start phase of most Delphi investigations is essential. This phase often leans heavily towards a qualitative conversation, where the essence lies in topic exploration (Sourani & Sohail, 2015). Numerous scholars have underscored this exploratory nature, suggesting using open-ended questions and allowing participants to share viewpoints, forecasts, and concerns. Such an open platform during the first-round acts as a catalyst, allowing for a comprehensive extraction of insights. Though crucial, round phases within the Delphi method do not have a universally required count. Literature has seen a range of rounds, from two to seven, with the commonality being at least two rounds in most studies (Yeung et al., 2009; Lucko & Rojas, 2010).

4. Findings and Result

In the phases of the Delphi study, the experts' responses illuminated the complex nature of social entrepreneurship strategies applied by the Avayeboom Bird Conservation Society. These strategies, as revealed, encompass community involvement, educational initiatives, and collaborative efforts with various stakeholders, highlighting a comprehensive approach to enhancing birdwatching-based ecotourism. Furthermore, these strategies demonstrate alignment with the broader goals of sustainable tourism and destination development, reflecting a nuanced understanding of the interplay between local conservation efforts and regional tourism objectives.

In the study, to ensure the accuracy of the data analysis, all interview transcripts were repeatedly read by the researcher to prevent any errors in data interpretation. Table 3. demonstrates the insights provided by the expert panel and serves as a systematic summary of the diverse strategies, challenges, and opportunities identified, offering valuable perspectives for future research and development in this field.

Table 3. Information on Themes and Categories

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Category
Strategic Community Engagement	Community Involvement and Education	Educating local communities about birdwatching/Involving locals in ecotourism activities
	Enhanced Collaborative Efforts	Collaboration with governmental and non-governmental bodies/ Partnerships with external entities
Innovative Ecotourism Offerings	Diversified Birdwatching Tours	Photographic tours/ Night tours/ Seasonal migratory tours
	Engagement with International Expertise	Learning from international experiences/Adapting global best practices locally
Operational Challenges and Solutions	Challenges and Performance Indicators	Funding and logistical issues/Habitat conservation/Use of tourist feedback and habitat quality as indicators
	Opportunities and Future Directions	Addressing climate change and urbanization/National events and digital engagement strategies
Alignment with Broader Goals	Sustainable Tourism and Development	Ecological balance and sustainable tourism/Economic growth vs. environmental stewardship
	Global Perspective and Local Action	International collaborations/ Balancing global knowledge with local actions

4.1. Round One

In the first round of our Delphi investigation, the initial Delphi stage, often termed the "scoping round," is where feedback and insights are gathered from selected participants (Konu, 2015). The primary focus is exploring and comprehending the panel's insights on the social entrepreneurship strategies employed by the AvayeBoom Bird Conservation Society to enhance birdwatching-based ecotourism. As the method demands, a qualitative conversation was engaged with the semi-structured interviews to investigate the subject. Each interview audio recordings were taken, transcribed, and analyzed for thematic patterns. Manual coding was employed for this task to bring out the underlying themes and recurring concepts. The subsequent steps involved synthesizing these themes into broader categories, which were intended to eventually aid in addressing our research questions. Questions in round one are as follows:

Strategies Employed by the Avayeboom Conservation Society

1. Can you briefly overview Avayeboom Conservation Society's significant initiatives in birdwatching-based ecotourism?
2. In what ways has social entrepreneurship been a driving force behind these initiatives?
3. Are there specific models or approaches society has adopted to promote and enhance birdwatching as a form of ecotourism?
4. How does society engage with local communities, tourists, and other stakeholders in promoting birdwatching-based ecotourism?
5. Are there collaborative efforts with other organizations or governmental bodies? If so, can you elaborate on some key collaborations?

Alignment with Broader Destination Development Goals

6. How do you see the role of the Avayeboom Conservation Society in the broader context of destination development in Iran?
7. How do society's initiatives in birdwatching-based ecotourism tie in with the overall goals of sustainable tourism and destination development?
8. Are there specific goals or benchmarks set by society in terms of destination development? Can you provide examples?
9. How does society ensure that its strategies in birdwatching-based ecotourism are in harmony with the destination's environmental, social, and economic needs?
10. Finally, are there challenges or obstacles that society faces in aligning its strategies with broader destination development goals? How are these being addressed?

The first round was crucial for understanding the Avayeboom Bird Conservation Society's to social entrepreneurship. It gave us a window into the diverse opinions our expert panel provided. As a starting point, it showed us the broad picture and pointed out the need for another round to stabilize the data.

While the various opinions were helpful, they made it tough to integrate the insights effectively. This is why the Delphi method is so useful. With the groundwork laid, the next rounds should provide a clearer and more detailed understanding of the subject.

In the present study, a thematic analysis method was used to understand and categorize the semi-structured interview responses deeply. This widely recognized qualitative research method helps identify, analyze, and describe patterns or 'themes' within the interview data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Initially, to ensure every detail was captured, the orally conducted interviews were meticulously transcribed. This process created a written record, enabling a more thorough examination (Smith & Firth, 2011).

Next, a thorough reading and re-reading of the transcripts was done to immerse ~~oneself~~ in the data, during which some initial notes of potential patterns and ideas were taken. After this, the initial coding of the data began. Significant sections of the transcripts were highlighted, and initial codes that captured the primary thoughts of parts of the data were developed. The coding stage is vital in thematic analysis as it lays the groundwork for identifying potential themes (Javadi & Zarea, 2016). After coding, the codes were grouped into potential themes. Each theme was meticulously checked and reviewed to ensure it presented a clear pattern in the data. Some themes were integrated, some were divided further, and a few that did not seem relevant to our research questions were excluded (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The final step was to refine and define the themes and narrate what each theme meant in the context of the gathered data. Using this approach

provided structure to our qualitative data and allowed us to uncover deep insights that may have been missed with a more surface-level analysis method. By engaging in this rigorous thematic analysis, an effort has been made to ensure an authentic and detailed representation of the interviewees' experiences and perceptions in this study.

From the synthesized responses, several core strategies and challenges became evident:

1. Strategies

1. Community Involvement and Education: This strategy was highlighted as one of the fundamental strategies, the society places a high emphasis on integrating local communities. The society seeks to foster an environment of support and interest by educating and involving them in birdwatching activities.

2. Collaboration with External Entities: The society's collaborative approach with governmental and non-governmental bodies, such as the electricity department, emphasizes its dedication to broadening its reach and impact.

3. Destination Development through Conservation Projects: Beyond conserving bird species, society leverages its conservation activities to promote and support ecotourism initiatives indirectly.

4. Emphasis on Local Expertise: By designating local environmental guards or tapping into the knowledge of native residents, society integrates local expertise into its broader strategies.

5. Diversified Birdwatching Tours: Offering diversified birdwatching tours is a strategy that caters to a broader audience and promotes sustainable tourism.

6. Engagement with International Expertise: Even amidst challenges, society tries to engage and learn from international experiences to elevate local practices.

2. Alignment of Strategies with Broader Destination Development Goals

1. Sustainable Tourism and Conservation Integration: The society's efforts in bird conservation promote ecological balance and catalyze sustainable tourism, aligning with broader goals of maintaining the ecological and cultural integrity of the region.

2. Local Economic Boost through Ecotourism: By promoting birdwatching and eco-tours, there is a potential for increased local business opportunities, thereby supporting local economic development.

3. Strengthening of International Relations through Tourism: Despite prevailing challenges, efforts to learn from international experiences indicate a vision to foster better international relations through tourism.

4. Promotion of Environmental Awareness: The educational initiatives of the society serve the dual purpose of promoting birdwatching and instilling a sense of environmental stewardship among the locals. This aligns with the broader goals of developing an informed and responsible tourist base.

By the end of Round 1, a structured list of core strategies and challenges was derived from the data. This initial analysis provided the foundation for the upcoming rounds, where these themes would be delved into further, aiming to achieve consensus and introduce new insights.

4.2. Round Two

After reviewing the first round's result, the second Delphi semi-structured interview questions were formulated. Participants were requested to evaluate (Sourani & Sohail, 2015) the strategies taken from round one responses and ask them to talk about real examples, suggestions, and feedback. One expert could not reply because of their busy schedules (Sourani & Sohail, 2015). After analyzing round two with thematic analysis, specific beneficial strategies for birdwatching-based ecotourism social entrepreneurs were considered.

Questions in round one is as follows:

Refinement and Consensus on Strategies

1. Based on our previous discussion, community involvement, and education were highlighted as fundamental strategies. How do you envision the best way to involve and educate the community?
2. Collaboration with both governmental and non-governmental bodies was mentioned. Are there any specific bodies that could be potential collaborators but have not been engaged yet?
3. Diversified birdwatching tours were highlighted as a strategy. What are some examples of these diversifications, and how do they cater to different tourist segments?
4. Engagement with international expertise was discussed. Can you shed light on any existing collaborations or engagements with international entities? And how has it benefited the society?

Delving into Challenges and Overcoming Them

5. Were there any challenges or obstacles in implementing the strategies discussed in our previous conversation? How did society address them?
6. How does society measure the impact of its strategies on birdwatching-based ecotourism? Are there any specific performance indicators?
7. Given the society's experience, what are some upcoming challenges and opportunities in the domain of birdwatching-based ecotourism in Iran?

Alignment with Broader Destination Development Goals - Refinement

8. In the broader context, how do you believe the society's strategies in birdwatching-based ecotourism can influence the perception of Iran as a tourist destination?
9. How does society plan to ensure that its future strategies and initiatives align with the changing dynamics of sustainable tourism and destination development?
10. Can you provide any recommendations or suggestions for the Avayeboom Conservation Society to enhance its impact on birdwatching-based ecotourism further and ensure alignment with broader goals?

From the synthesized responses, several core strategies and challenges became evident:

1. **Strategic Community Engagement**: All experts highlighted the importance of directly involving local communities and engaging through educational programs, workshops, and storytelling.

2. **Enhanced Collaborative Efforts**: Experts identified a need for potential collaborations beyond governmental bodies, including regional tourism boards, local NGOs, and international societies.

3. **Innovative Ecotourism Offerings**: There was a consensus on diversifying birdwatching tours to cater to various interests, such as photographic tours, night tours, and seasonal migratory tours.

4. **Challenges and Performance Indicators**: Challenges such as funding, logistical issues, and habitat conservation were discussed, along with the importance of performance indicators like tourist feedback and habitat quality.

5. **Opportunities and Future Directions**: Upcoming challenges such as climate change and urbanization were noted, alongside opportunities for national events and digital engagement to enhance ecotourism.

6. **Sustainable Tourism and Development**: Experts provided insights on how the society's initiatives could align with broader destination development goals, emphasizing the balance between economic growth and environmental stewardship.

7. **Global Perspective and Local Action**: A call for more international collaborations was made to ensure local actions benefit from global knowledge and best practices.

The descriptive analysis was performed immediately after each Delphi round, ensuring the immediacy and relevance of the findings, as emphasized by Robson (2011). This methodical examination provided a clear depiction of expert opinions and strategies, confirming initial insights and offering a deeper perspective on the practical implementation and measurement of these strategies within the context of birdwatching-based ecotourism by the Avayeboom Conservation Society.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings from both rounds of the Delphi study illuminate the intricate interplay between social entrepreneurship, community involvement, and sustainable ecotourism practices within the context of birdwatching in Iran. As highlighted by our expert panel, strategic community engagement is the cornerstone of successfully promoting birdwatching-based ecotourism. This approach aligns with the social entrepreneurship model, which emphasizes the societal and ecological aspects alongside economic gains (Mair & Marti, 2006). The Avayeboom Conservation Society's focus on education and community participation underscores the crucial role of social capital in fostering environmental stewardship—a pivotal concept in conservation efforts.

Enhanced collaborative efforts, advocated by the experts, signal a transition towards a more integrated approach involving various stakeholders, resonating with Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant's (2005) multi-stakeholder framework. These collaborations, including partnerships with governmental and non-governmental organizations, regional tourism boards, local NGOs, and international societies, broaden the scope and impact of birdwatching-based ecotourism initiatives.

Moreover, the introduction of innovative ecotourism offerings, such as diversified birdwatching tours, reflects society's adaptability and responsiveness to market demands, a key trait of successful entrepreneurial ventures (Leech, 2013). This diversification caters to various tourist interests, promoting sustainable tourism and aligning with the broader goals of maintaining the region's ecological and cultural integrity.

The study reinforces the relevance of stakeholder theory in ecotourism (Freeman, 1984) and the importance of the triple bottom line—people, planet, profit—in sustainable tourism practices (Elkington, 1997). The identified challenges and opportunities, including funding, logistical issues, and climate change, provide a pragmatic view of the operational landscape. These insights corroborate the dynamic capabilities theory, which posits that organizations must adapt to changing environments to maintain a competitive advantage (Teece, 2007).

The Avayeboom Conservation Society, through its commitment to social entrepreneurship, has significantly contributed to developing birdwatching-based ecotourism in Iran. Society's efforts align well with broader destination development goals by fostering community engagement, enhancing collaboration with diverse entities, diversifying tourism offerings, and embracing global perspectives while championing local action.

For the tourism sector, this study underscores the importance of integrating social entrepreneurship into ecotourism practices. By adopting a community-centric approach, tourism operators can enhance their sustainability and create more inclusive and impactful tourism experiences. The study's findings suggest that birdwatching-based ecotourism can be a viable strategy for promoting ecological conservation and economic development in rural areas.

For the public, especially local communities, the study highlights the benefits of participating in ecotourism activities. These benefits include increased environmental awareness, economic opportunities, and improved social cohesion. The Avayeboom Conservation Society's model demonstrates how educating and involving locals in birdwatching activities can foster a sense of ownership and responsibility towards conservation efforts.

Future research should expand beyond a single conservation society to encompass multiple organizations to provide a more comprehensive view of birdwatching-based ecotourism in Iran. Quantitative measures could be employed to validate the findings and explore the impact of political and economic sanctions on conservation efforts and ecotourism development in Iran. Additionally, research could investigate the long-term impacts of community involvement and educational initiatives on conservation outcomes and tourism development.

Practical Recommendations:

1. **Enhancing Community Engagement**: Conservation societies should develop structured programs to educate and involve local communities in ecotourism activities. Workshops, storytelling sessions, and hands-on conservation projects can foster deeper community ties and environmental stewardship.

2. **Strengthening Collaborations**: Establishing partnerships with a broader range of stakeholders, including regional tourism boards, local NGOs, and international societies, can enhance the effectiveness and reach of ecotourism initiatives.

3. **Diversifying Ecotourism Offerings**: Offering a variety of birdwatching tours tailored to different interests can attract a wider audience and promote sustainable tourism practices. Photographic tours, night tours, and seasonal migratory tours are examples of such diversification.

4. **Addressing Operational Challenges**: Developing strategies to secure funding, address logistical issues, and implement performance indicators such as tourist feedback and habitat quality can enhance the operational efficiency of ecotourism projects.

5. **Adapting to Climate Change**: Societies should develop adaptive strategies to mitigate the impacts of climate change on bird habitats and ecotourism activities. This could include habitat restoration projects and climate resilience education programs.

In conclusion, the Avayeboom Conservation Society's approach to birdwatching-based ecotourism offers a valuable model for integrating social entrepreneurship with sustainable tourism. By fostering community engagement, enhancing collaborations, and diversifying tourism offerings, society has created a robust framework that aligns with broader destination development goals. The insights from this study provide a roadmap for other conservation societies and NGOs looking to implement similar strategies in ecotourism, highlighting the importance of social entrepreneurship in promoting ecological conservation and sustainable development.

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