EQUATIONS Webinar Summary:
Is tourism a Viable Livelihood Option?

It's been about a month since WHO declared COVID-19 outbreak as a pandemic. Amidst looming uncertainty, we have started evaluating its short term as well as long term direct and ripple impacts on a wide spectrum of society, especially those who are more marginalised and vulnerable.

Tourism, which is considered to be one of the world’s most labour intensive sectors, has been impacted the most. The Federation of Associations in Indian Tourism and Hospitality (FAITH) has estimated that the crisis might lead to 38 million people associated with the sector losing their jobs, which is around 70% of the total estimated workforce.

Tourism is one of the sectors which is always negatively impacted by disasters, but this time the vulnerable nature of tourism is exposed to a greater extent. On the one hand, the sector is vulnerable to extreme events, but at the same time unsustainable tourism development is also making vulnerable and marginalised communities more vulnerable.

This crisis gives us an opportunity to discuss and focus shift from hard selling of tourism products/services to a new paradigm. This requires a complete rethinking, redefining and rebuilding of the tourism sector. With this understanding, EQUITABLE TOURISM OPTIONS (EQUATIONS) is facilitating a series of webinars to bring the experiences of practitioners, community leaders, campaigners, policy makers, planners and innovators in the tourism sector in building resilient communities and better practices from across the country.

On 2nd May 2020, EQUATIONS organized a webinar - ‘Is Tourism a Viable Livelihood Option?’ - to explore community resilience and practices in the tourism sector and communities in general. It was attended by about 100 participants. The panel consisted of 3 panelists and a moderator, who have extensive and diverse experience in community centered tourism development in regions like Kerala, Uttarakhand and Himachal Pradesh.

The Panelists for the webinar were:
Ishita Khanna, the co-founder of Ecosphere, a community tourism enterprise in the Spiti Valley of Western Himalayas.

Mallika Virdi, the founder Director of Himalayan Ark, a community tourism enterprise in Munsiyari.

Oamjje John, the Director of Kabani Community Tourism Service and a community trainer and community organiser in Kerala.

Joyatri Ray, the Director of EQUATIONS, shared a brief profile of the organisation and then she introduced the panelists and the moderator K.T Suresh, the Secretary of EQUATIONS. K.T Suresh set the floor for the discussion on the webinar by emphasizing that the viability of tourism as a livelihood option has been a perennial question and not specific to COVID situation.

The objective of the webinar was to discuss the questions of:

- How can the community and people who are directly part of the industry find livelihood options when tourism becomes a pure dominant economic act in parts of the world where the market processes are strong as would have been in other cases?

- Does it allow for a more diversified understanding of livelihoods? Does it have a Banyan Tree approach in terms of taking livelihood from within its own sphere of influence or does it allow a diverse set of livelihoods and diverse set of ecosystems to survive?

In the first half of the session K.T Suresh (moderator) requested the panelists to introduce the practices in their community tourism enterprises and share their views on tourism as a viable livelihood option in the geographies they have been working in.

In response, the panelists briefly introduced their respective organizations and geographies in which they work. The key takeaway from their sharings were as follows:
Challenges and concerns:

- **Rural livelihood depends on natural resources, therefore livelihood and conservation could not be seen separately. For example: in Uttarakhand, Van Panchayat is recognised under Panchayati Raj institution to manage forest commons by the local communities. This kind of decentralized development and management model should be adopted in other states by the respective governments.**

- **The alternative practitioners have taken into consideration that tourism is a delicate and unstable industry especially in the hill communities as well as in hills and coasts of Kerala where floods and landslides are part and parcel of life.**

- **In a community run homestay enterprise, it's crucial to involve community members who are also interested in looking into the issues of forest commons and have prioritised the economically weaker section.**

- **In the rural context, recognising the limits of socio-cultural and natural resources is far more important in terms of sustainability. The costs and values that go as inputs to tourism practices are as significant as the income generated. The direct link with the forests and water enables them to understand the costs paid by them.**

- **The panelists shared that tourism is co-creation, where the tourists also have an active participatory role to play. They shared that many tourists give back skills to the communities like digital and technological skills etc. Tourists should also be equally respectful towards what resource and services they are using and should also contribute back. Panelists shared about innovative volunteer programmes run by their organisation to engage tourists. A good example shared was of Kabani’s traveller-producer-consumer network. This network was created in Wayanad post 2018 floods in Kerala. The network created a co-operative farmer’s society and took 6 acres of land on lease. On this land, farmers with the support of travellers and producers started cultivating with a small investment from each. The farm produce was available for tourists to pre-buy.**

**Challenges and concerns:**

- **The panelists expressed that there are several challenges faced by the unorganised sector linked to tourism. There is a lot of undercutting.**

- **The proliferation of homestays are not being responsible for the commons, when local people do not participate in looking at the commons. This makes freeriders a huge challenge. If people are not involved in keeping the forest commons, there is degradation and that is a big challenge.**

- **With respect to COVID-19 response there are some serious questions as to how bailouts, subsidies and waivers are going to happen, as there are huge sections of the unorganised sector involved in tourism. With the economic setback of the coming times, people will be looking at budget options for travel without proper planning.**

- **In topographies where there is enough water, there has been support to traditional livelihoods like agriculture. However sections of communities who have no or limited access to natural resources and are more dependent on agriculture have got affected more as the current pandemic has wiped out the travel season.**

- **They expressed their concerns related to the concept of community participation which should happen in 4 levels- First participation in decision making. Second, participation in business where tour programmes were organised to get international travellers. Third, participation in managing the locations, tourist spots. Fourth, participation in monitoring in tourism activities. These processes should be replicated in all community tourism initiatives.**
In the concluding session, the panelists emphasized on two questions that came through the cluster of questions by the participants:

- In what ways can tourism trigger the economy of a place and also contribute to local ecology in relation to other economic activities where tourism becomes a little more mature?
- Is there any notion of a limit to growth directing one or other livelihood as before or after?

The panelists shared the view that responsible tourism can not happen on its own. Ownership should be with the commons. The Government can take a proactive role in such times. There is a lot of tokenism when it comes to the role of communities. It is expected that post COVID-19, people will rush into more remote or untouched areas, but without a roadmap, this will be a disaster. One has to go beyond tokenism, there should be a roadmap. The Panchayati Raj Institutions should take up more responsibilities and should not be just service providers to tourism initiatives. Panchayats should play a more active role. Government can collaborate with locals to build skills and capacity during and post COVID-19. They stressed that any enterprise, when you look for profits, you also need to look at risks. If you are given agency and own your enterprise as a community, you will begin to assess your risks and look at how limits can be weaved in. They questioned the concept of Growth Limit.

They also expressed their apprehensions that there will be a surge in domestic tourism in rural tourism areas. Are we really prepared to take so many tourists to the hills? There has to be preparedness to take it by rural communities and rural communities do not have the bandwidth to accommodate it. It is usually the richer person who is able to start homestays. They felt that when you create a balance - when tourism only supplements the main livelihoods, then it automatically creates a balance. However, there is a lot of scepticism towards Responsible Tourism.

They questioned that even if tourism does not take this route, to what extent does it manage to keep the balance in terms of economic systems and ecological balance especially in the vulnerable spaces? This is complex especially in the post pandemic situations. Human activities have kept a mask on these issues. Some of these serious issues that need to be dealt with are the role of the state in providing working capital, bailouts and financial stimulus for the small tourism enterprise at the local levels. But in all this we need to emphasise upon the limit of growth in terms of numbers and value to local areas. Also there is a serious requirement of reformation in state tourism policies, and policies concerning labour linked to the value chain of the tourism industry

The sessions were wrapped up by the moderator by stressing on this situation which opens an opportunity to advocate community tourism options as a safer model for responsible tourism, but planning has to be as close to the ground as possible; and revise and revitalise the ways we think of tourism, which brings people’s creativity to the forefront.

He left the participants with a question ‘Can destinations decide their destinies as we engage with formal mainstream tourism debate? There is a need to focus on a script for tourism to re enter these spaces.’