

THE IMPACT OF TOURISM CLUSTERS ON SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This article examines the impact of tourism clusters on the development of small and medium-sized enterprises in Uzbekistan. Tourism clusters connect accommodation facilities, tour operators, transport providers, restaurants, artisans, farmers, cultural institutions, financial organizations and public authorities within a regional value chain.

Keywords: tourism clusters, small and medium-sized enterprises, entrepreneurship, local value chain, tourism services, regional development, Uzbekistan.

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается влияние туристических кластеров на развитие малых и средних предприятий в Узбекистане. Туристические кластеры объединяют средства размещения, туроператоров, транспортные компании, рестораны, ремесленников, фермеров, учреждения культуры, финансовые организации и государственные органы в единую региональную цепочку создания стоимости.

Ключевые слова: туристические кластеры, малые и средние предприятия, предпринимательство, местная цепочка создания стоимости, туристические услуги, региональное развитие, Узбекистан.

Annotatsiya. Ushbu maqolada turizm klasterlarining O'zbekistondagi kichik va o'rta korxonalar rivojlanishiga ta'siri ko'rib chiqilgan. Turizm klasterlari joylashtirish vositalari, turopoperatorlar, transport korxonalari, restoranlar, hunarmandlar, fermerlar, madaniyat muassasalari, moliyaviy tashkilotlar va davlat organlarini yagona hududiy qiymat zanjiriga birlashtiradi.

Kalit so'zlar: turizm klasterlari, kichik va o'rta korxonalar, tadbirkorlik, mahalliy qiymat zanjiri, turizm xizmatlari, hududiy rivojlanish, O'zbekiston.

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) play a central role in the tourism economy because a destination's tourism product is created by numerous interconnected businesses. Hotels, family guesthouses, restaurants, transport companies, guides, artisans, farms, retailers, event organizers and digital service providers jointly shape the visitor experience. However, an individual small enterprise often lacks sufficient financial resources, marketing capacity and negotiating power to compete independently in national and international markets.

A tourism cluster can be defined as a geographical concentration of interconnected tourism enterprises, supporting industries, educational institutions and public

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organizations. Porter explains that clusters can raise productivity, encourage innovation and improve access to specialized suppliers, workers and information. In tourism, clustering makes it possible to coordinate services and develop an integrated destination product instead of offering isolated services.

Uzbekistan has favorable conditions for the development of cultural, pilgrimage, gastronomic, ecological, rural and recreational tourism clusters. Samarkand, Bukhara and Khorezm have strong cultural-heritage resources, while the Tashkent region can combine urban and mountain tourism. The Fergana Valley has potential for handicraft and gastronomic clusters, and Karakalpakstan can develop ecological and Aral Sea tourism. These destinations can provide markets for thousands of SMEs if tourism expenditure is effectively connected with local production.

The most direct effect of tourism clusters is the expansion of demand for goods and services. The arrival of domestic and international visitors increases sales for hotels, guesthouses, restaurants, transport companies, guides, souvenir shops and entertainment businesses.

A cluster can also help small enterprises reach international consumers indirectly. A local artisan or farmer may not be able to export products independently, but sales to foreign tourists represent a form of on-site export. Tourism thus enables small enterprises to receive revenue from international demand without establishing foreign distribution networks.

Tourism clusters create connections between tourism businesses and other sectors. Hotels and restaurants purchase food, furniture, textiles, cleaning products, maintenance, construction and digital services. Tour operators cooperate with drivers, guides, museums, event organizers and craft producers. Such connections distribute tourism expenditure beyond the enterprises that directly serve visitors. For example, a hotel purchasing fruit, vegetables and traditional food products from local farmers generates indirect income in agriculture. The use of locally manufactured furniture, textiles and souvenirs supports production and handicrafts. When tourism enterprises source products from outside the region, a significant part of visitor expenditure leaves the local economy. Therefore, the SME impact of a cluster depends on the strength of its local supplier relationships.

Individual SMEs often cannot finance international advertising campaigns or participate in major tourism exhibitions. Cluster-based marketing enables businesses to promote a destination collectively. Hotels, tour operators, restaurants and cultural attractions can use a common brand, website, event calendar and booking system.

Joint marketing reduces the average promotional cost per enterprise and helps create a consistent destination image. A visitor is more likely to select a destination that offers an integrated package of accommodation, transport, attractions and activities than one that promotes unrelated businesses separately.

Digital platforms further expand these opportunities. Small guesthouses and craft producers can use social media, online marketplaces, mapping services and reservation

platforms to reach customers. Cluster organizations can provide training and technical assistance to businesses that lack digital marketing skills.

Geographical proximity and regular cooperation enable SMEs to exchange market information, service standards and technological knowledge. Tourism enterprises can jointly identify changes in visitor preferences, foreign-language requirements, digital-payment methods and sustainability expectations.

Research on tourism networks shows that clusters can create innovation opportunities for small enterprises by combining knowledge and resources that individual firms do not possess. Cooperation with universities and vocational institutions can improve staff qualifications, while partnerships with technology companies can encourage the use of online booking, customer relationship management and data analytics.

Clusters also stimulate product innovation. SMEs can combine cultural heritage, gastronomy, crafts and local traditions to develop new tourism routes, workshops, festivals and visitor experiences. Such products differentiate destinations and create additional income sources.

Participation in an organized cluster may improve the ability of SMEs to obtain finance and government support. Financial institutions can assess a coordinated destination-development program more easily than numerous unrelated business proposals. Cluster members can prepare joint investment projects, share infrastructure and provide evidence of projected tourist demand.

Nevertheless, access to finance remains a major challenge for SMEs in Uzbekistan. The Asian Development Bank identifies collateral requirements, limited financial transparency, high borrowing costs and insufficient financial knowledge among the barriers to SME financing. Tourism enterprises may face additional difficulties because their revenue can be seasonal and sensitive to economic, health and geopolitical shocks.

Cluster policies can address these problems through credit guarantees, concessional loans, leasing, microfinance and co-financing of shared infrastructure. Financial assistance should be accompanied by business planning and accounting support so that investments remain commercially sustainable.

Tourism clusters encourage the creation of labor-intensive SMEs. Guesthouses, restaurants, guiding, handicrafts and passenger transport require relatively limited initial capital compared with many industrial activities. They can therefore create employment for young people, women and residents of rural areas.

Cluster participation may also support business formalization. Informal service providers can gain access to official marketing channels, training, finance and public procurement after registration. However, formalization should not impose compliance costs that small family businesses cannot manage. Simplified registration, taxation and certification procedures are necessary.

Tourism-cluster policy should therefore support connections between leading destinations and surrounding rural districts. Routes combining major heritage cities with villages, craft Centres, natural attractions and agricultural enterprises can distribute

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visitor expenditure more widely. Regional tourism development should be evaluated by the number of participating SMEs and household enterprises, not only by total visitor arrivals.

Tourism clusters do not automatically benefit every small enterprise. Several risks must be considered:

- domination of the cluster by large hotels or tour operators;
- unequal access to marketing and public support;
- dependence on a limited number of tourism platforms;
- seasonal fluctuations in demand and revenue;
- insufficient service quality and foreign-language skills;
- high certification and digitalization costs;
- rising commercial rents in popular destinations;
- vulnerability to economic, health and geopolitical shocks;
- revenue leakage through imported products and external ownership.

Large companies may capture most tourism revenue while local SMEs perform low-value activities. A cluster can also become an administrative structure that exists formally but does not produce meaningful cooperation among businesses. Effective governance therefore requires transparent membership rules, regular consultation and representation of small enterprises.

To strengthen the positive impact of tourism clusters on SMEs, Uzbekistan should implement the following measures:

1. Create regional cluster coordination organizations. These organizations should include SMEs, local authorities, educational institutions, banks and cultural organizations.
2. Develop local supplier databases. Hotels, restaurants and tour operators should be connected with local farmers, artisans, manufacturers and service providers.
3. Introduce local procurement programs. Tourism enterprises receiving public incentives could be encouraged to purchase a defined share of appropriate goods and services from regional SMEs.
4. Expand access to finance. Credit guarantees, microloans, leasing and concessional financing should be available for guesthouses, craft enterprises, restaurants and tourism transport providers.
5. Provide practical training. Programs should cover hospitality management, foreign languages, food safety, digital marketing, accounting, customer service and environmental standards.
6. Support common digital platforms. Regional booking systems, destination websites and electronic maps can improve the market visibility of small businesses.
7. Reduce seasonality. Gastronomic festivals, pilgrimage routes, conferences, cultural events and winter tourism can create more stable year-round revenue.
8. Promote inclusive entrepreneurship. Special assistance should target women, young entrepreneurs, rural households and people with limited access to traditional employment.

9. Establish measurable cluster indicators. Evaluation should include SME revenue growth, business survival, formal employment, local procurement, digital sales and the regional retention of tourism income.

10. Protect competition. Public support and access to cluster resources should be transparent so that large companies cannot exclude smaller participants.

Tourism clusters can have a substantial positive influence on small and medium-sized enterprises in Uzbekistan. They expand consumer demand, develop local value chains, reduce marketing costs, support innovation and create opportunities for regional entrepreneurship. The growth of inbound tourism, travel-service exports, accommodation facilities and tourism employment demonstrates the increasing economic significance of the sector. However, the simultaneous growth of tourism and SMEs does not by itself prove a causal cluster effect. A more precise assessment would require enterprise-level data comparing SME revenue, employment, productivity and survival inside and outside organized tourism clusters.

The effectiveness of tourism clusters should ultimately be measured by the amount of tourism revenue retained in local economies and the number of sustainable SMEs integrated into tourism value chains. Policies focused only on visitor numbers and major infrastructure may increase tourism activity without producing inclusive entrepreneurial development. Strong local procurement, access to finance, skills development, digitalization and transparent cluster governance are therefore essential for transforming tourism growth into long-term SME competitiveness.

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