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## How to Develop Tourism in the Least Developed Regions? Notes from Travel Agencies\*

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### Abstract

Tourism, a rapidly growing sector around the world, is perceived as panacea for socio-economic problems in many regions. This study aims to compile the opinions of the travel agencies about tourism development in one of the least developed regions of Turkey, the Eastern Anatolia. Qualitative research method has been utilized to get in-depth views. The study reveals out that replacing the negative image caused by the concept of underdeveloped region with images such as fresh, untouched and original is principal. Moreover, findings indicate that tourism can be used as a development tool provided that correct steps are taken after planning with the participation of all stakeholders. The study is important not only because it contributes to the literature by determining the remarks of travel agencies, but also offers valuable information to tourism planners and decision makers.

**Keywords:** Travel agencies, underdeveloped regions, tourism development, Turkey.

### Öz

Dünya çapında hızla büyüyen bir sektör olan turizm, dünyanın pek çok yerinde sosyo-ekonomik sorunlara deva olarak algılanmaktadır. Bu çalışmanın amacı Türkiye'nin en az gelişmiş bölgeleri arasında yer alan Doğu Anadolu'da turizm gelişimine yönelik seyahat acentalarının bakış açılarını derlemektir. Çalışma kapsamında görüşleri derinlemesine elde edebilmek için nitel araştırma yöntemi kullanılmıştır. Çalışma geri kalmış bölge kavramının oluşturduğu olumsuz imajın taze, el değmemiş ve özgün gibi imajlarla yer değiştirmesinin temel adım olması gerektiğini göstermektedir. Çalışma bulguları ayrıca, tüm paydaşların katılımı ile gerçekleştirilecek planlama sonrasında doğru adımların atılması durumunda, turizmin geri kalmış bölgeler için bir kalkınma aracı olarak kullanılabilmesini göstermektedir. Çalışma, seyahat acentalarının az gelişmiş bölgelere bakış açısını belirleyen çalışma eksikliğinin giderilmesine katkı sunmasının yanı sıra turizm planlayıcılarına ve karar vericilere kayda değer veriler sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Seyahat acentaları, az gelişmiş bölgeler, turizm gelişimi, Türkiye.

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## INTRODUCTION

Besides its social, cultural and environmental positive impacts (Chan, 2010; Crouch & Ritchie, 1999), tourism is seen as a tool for regional development, especially in developing countries and the least developed regions where the development options are very limited other than tourism (Chok, Macbeth & Warren, 2007; Scheyvens & Russell, , 2012; Yang & Wall, 2009). Therefore, tourism has been flourishing sector and national and/or local authorities have been supporting tourism development since 1950s (Goodwin, 2007; Harrison & Schipani, 2007).

Therefore, the competition in tourism is very intense (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999), and requires innovation and creativity (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014). Competitiveness in tourism can be defined as doing things better and differently than other destinations do (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007) while keeping the authenticity. In other words, destinations need to provide not only quality but also new (or different) and creative experiences for tourists in order to have a competitive advantage (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014).

To get a share or to increase the size of the piece taken from the tourism pie, several locations prioritized tourism development with “laissez faire” manner and in return for suffering from some irreversible social and environmental problems as well as losing their customers (UNWTO, 1994). To prevent such undesired consequences, coordinated and therefore planned progress is crucial (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014; UNWTO, 1994). With such an approach, tourism resources will be maintained and the positive benefits might be maximized and the negative effects can be diminished (Plog, 2001; Tosun & Jenkins, 1996; UNWTO, 1994).

Planning is not only documenting ideals; but also it is harmonization of the sources and demand of the markets (Tosun & Jenkins, 1996). Therefore, in both planning and implementation process; in order to ensure that a destination has competitive advantages, it is necessary to understand the market requirements and what the destination has to meet (Chan, 2010).

Having a complex and adaptive structure (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014; UNWTO, 1994); tourism requires an integrated management approach based on the participation of related parties (Svensson, Nordin & Flagestad, 2005; UNWTO 2007). This approach includes cooperation of all stakeholders (governmental bodies, private sector, local people and tourists) (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014). Collaboration between the actors of tourism is placed at the very core to develop tourism on more sustainable and competitive base (Chan, 2010).

As Tosun & Timothy (2003, 3) noted, participation “*is a development instrument and, more broadly, a body of influence which is capable of undermining the related vices of ignorance, indolence and class conflict*” and is fundamental for all phases of planning; decision making, implementing, monitoring and revising. Participation in planning and then implementation assures that all actors in tourism will be able to adopt new environment of globalization and there will be more satisfied tourists (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014).

To satisfy the tourists, the first step is to identify what they expect and require. Though destination management aims to fulfill the tourist expectation during his/her journey, the voice of tourists is mostly unnoticed (Pearce & Schänzel, 2013). Travel agencies can ensure that this voice is heard by other stakeholders. Thanks to close links both with service buyers (tourists) and providers (firms, public institutions), travel agencies can serve as bridges between partners and they can express the expectations, demands and complaints of tourists. Although the travel purposes differ from those of tourists, travel agencies are obliged to satisfy purposes of tourists in order to realize their goal of increasing their profitability. Therefore, involvement of private tourism sector - especially travel agencies- in the destination planning is also gaining importance to contribute competitiveness of destination on a sustainable base (Ashley & Roe, 2003; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007).

Turkey is a very popular destination worldwide. As per the annual number of visitors and tourism revenue, in 2016, Turkey occupies 10<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> rank respectively in the world while she occupied 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> ranks with 39.5 million tourist arrivals and 29.5 billion USD revenue in 2015 (UNWTO, 2016, 2017). In spite of these glamorous numbers, tourism in Turkey has some problems such as congestion near sea-side, seasonality and low expenditures per tourist. Moreover, tourism has matured in the western regions (as a facultative and conjectural decisions sourcing from the policies adopted in 1960s), reflecting general regional inequalities of Turkey (Tosun & Jenkins, 1996). Even though, it can be advocated that tourism procured particular developments in some rural impoverished parts of Aegean and Mediterranean regions, it has also brought some important social and environmental problems on the ground of unplanned (or planned but badly implemented) progress. Moreover, Turkey has based its tourism on 3S and other available resources are underutilized. Therefore, Turkey aims to expand the tourism all over the country to utilize its inert resources (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007a).

Even though the studies on tourism planning and destination competitiveness are abundant, there is a

dearth of such studies in impoverished destinations (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). This study was conducted to determine the first steps for a sustainable tourism development in the least developed regions. The data was obtained from travel agencies and the results reflect the private sector views and also (indirectly) the perspectives of tourists.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Tourism is not just an economic activity; it affects the lifestyles of both visitors and the hosts (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999) by impacting the destinations in positive and negative ways. Because of the positive economic impacts, it is highly supported by authorities; therefore, there is a huge competition between tourism destinations. However, it has a versatile structure and inter-organizational and inter-sectoral complexity (Pforr, 2006; Wang & Ap, 2013) and therefore without planning, the impacts may occur in unforeseen and undesired directions (UNWTO, 1994).

Since 1970s, even though tourism has been considered as a development tool, in the last decades, the focus has turned into the local development through tourism (Ashley & Jones, 2001; Harrison & Schipani, 2007) and its importance for the least developed (or impoverished) regions is emphasized by many scholars (Alipour, 1996; Goodwin, 2007; Yang & Wall, 2009; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007).

Underdevelopment has many complex dimensions including inadequate income (due to limited qualifications and job opportunities), deficits in basic public services (such as education, health, housing, clean water), lower life span expectancies, deprivation of self-confidence, poor participation and inequitable delegation in decision making (Lima, Eusébio & Partidário, 2011; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007).

For impoverished settlements, tourism has much greater potential compared to many other sectors (Chok et al., 2007; Roe & Urquhart, 2004). These prospects include creating jobs linked with agriculture (de Kadt, 1979), employment and progression opportunities especially for youths and women who have very low skills (Harrison & Schipani, 2007) and consequently improving living conditions (Scheyvens & Russell, 2012). In addition, the local entrepreneurship and proprietorship may also be improved with the help of basic funding and training programs (Harrison & Schipani, 2007).

Independent from the type of tourism to be developed in a region, the planning paradigm has changed into new rubrics as planning for local with locals due to the fact that the plans reflecting the priorities and wishes of

locals may be implemented better to increase the benefits of tourism. Due to its complex nature, without collective efforts, tourism cannot be managed. Complex structure of the tourism sector beclouds to make strategic decisions (Phillips & Moutinho, 2014) and actors of both supply and demand sides may help to determine the advantages and disadvantages (Chan, 2010). In this respect, destination management which is mainly accepted as “*overall attractiveness and quality experiences that are equal or better than those of the alternative destination for specific markets*” (Hall & Coles, 2008; 18), is a core tool to be successful in tough competition. Contemporarily, for tourism, competitiveness foregrounds to supply better and differentiated experiences to the guests (Pearce & Schänzel, 2013). Furthermore; gaining competitive edge is a primary concern for destinations but there is not a single model fitting everywhere. Therefore, studies suggest that coordination and cooperation between all partners (institutional or non-institutional) are essential (Morgan, 2012; Pearce, 2016; Svensson et al. 2005; Wang & Ap, 2013).

Therefore; competitiveness needs to employ long-term strategies considering the wide range of opportunities, costs and benefits (Crouch & Ritchie, 1999). Since destination management sets forth the failures (Laws, 1995), and duplications (Pearce, 2016), decision-makers need to analyze, determine and utilize the advantages of a destination while minimizing the disadvantages.

In the literature, destination management has many duties (Pearce, 2016) one of which is planning. Planned development approach at both national and local level is a very basic principle since planning efforts aim to achieve comprehensive improvement in social, physical and institutional factors (UNWTO, 1994). While poor (or no) planning and implementation may cause economic, social and environmental collapses (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007), successful executions will ensure destination to function better for residents and the guests. This is particularly important for underdeveloped regions where governmental authorities, NGOs and private sector have very limited sources and experience for tourism development (UNWTO, 1994) and planning may help them develop tourism without wasting money, time, natural, cultural resources and also hopes of residents.

Hence, structures enabling the participation of all actors into planning process are instrumental for success in tourism. This inclusive planning process will ensure that the tourism development will be based on an alignment between the resources and people's desires (Morrison, 2013; Pearce, 2016). Because interest groups influence the implementation process (Hall & Jenkins, 1995; Wang & Ap, 2013), participation

will bridge between demand and supply (Lai et al. 2006). This is more important for the impoverished regions (Tosun, 2000; Zhao & Ritchie, 2007) because they have to hit twelve with very limited resources. The wrong decisions and steps may result in deepening the underdevelopment of the region and despair the locals (Dhanani & Islam, 2002, Zhao & Ritchie, 2007)

Public sector, private enterprises and NGOs should be considered when determining the partners. Literature suggests that tourist should also be counted among the partners in destination management (Hassan, 2000). Private sector is sine qua non for tourism development as they invest money, develop the products and actively market the destination (Zhao & Ritchie, 2007). Their participation in preparation and implementation of the policies is fundamental. Moreover, companies who can reflect the demands of the market can enhance advantages of tourism development plan (Harrison & Schipani, 2007).

From this perspective, even though the tourism distribution system has been changed in the age of internet, travel agencies still occupy a bridging role between destinations and consumers (McKercher, Packer, Yau & Lam, 2003). Travel agents are seen as not only the package tour or ticket sellers (Bitner and Booms 1982), but also the experts of tourism products and the best holiday options. They affect the decisions of tourists (Middleton, 1994) as tourists may rely on their advices and guidance (Heung & Zhu, 2005) especially for package tours (Heung & Chu, 2000).

and strengths of a destination (Xin & Chan, 2014). Although travel agencies may play a crucial role in featuring destinations in tourism market, creating a destination image, and by extension, an increased desire to visit (del Bosque, San Martin & Collado, 2006; Michalkó, Irimiás & Timothy, 2015), they are rarely taken into account in tourism development process (Miguel, Moliner, Sanchez, Rodriguez & Callarisa, 2007) especially in impoverished regions.

This study has conducted interviews with travel agencies to gain insights about tourism development paces in impoverished regions. The travel agencies were chosen as participant because they are key players in tourism and their views capture the professional concerns, and to a certain extent, the views of tourists. The agencies have pointed out some critical issues as first steps towards developing a well-managed destination and creating tourist satisfaction. Therefore, the main contribution of this study is to supplement the destination planning literature by the insights of travel agencies from the impoverished destinations.

## STUDY FIELD

Besides the other targets, Tourism Strategy of Turkey-2023 (TST) (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007a) intends to increase the competitiveness of tourism sector through creation of regional tourism brands and diversification of tourism products and destinations. Eastern Anatolia is one of



**Figure 1** Turkey in Europe and Eastern Anatolia in Turkey

**Source:** Worldatlas, 2016.

Customers demand more from the travel agencies and to succeed in a severe competition, travel agencies have to offer best options for their clients' changing needs and increasing demands (Heung & Chu, 2000). Therefore, as Dube and Reneghan, (2000) point out, travel agents aim to promote and sell well known and sometimes authentic but well-organized destinations.

In this context, travel agencies have a mediating role between tourists and tourism sector. Thus, they may be meritorious guides to assess the weaknesses

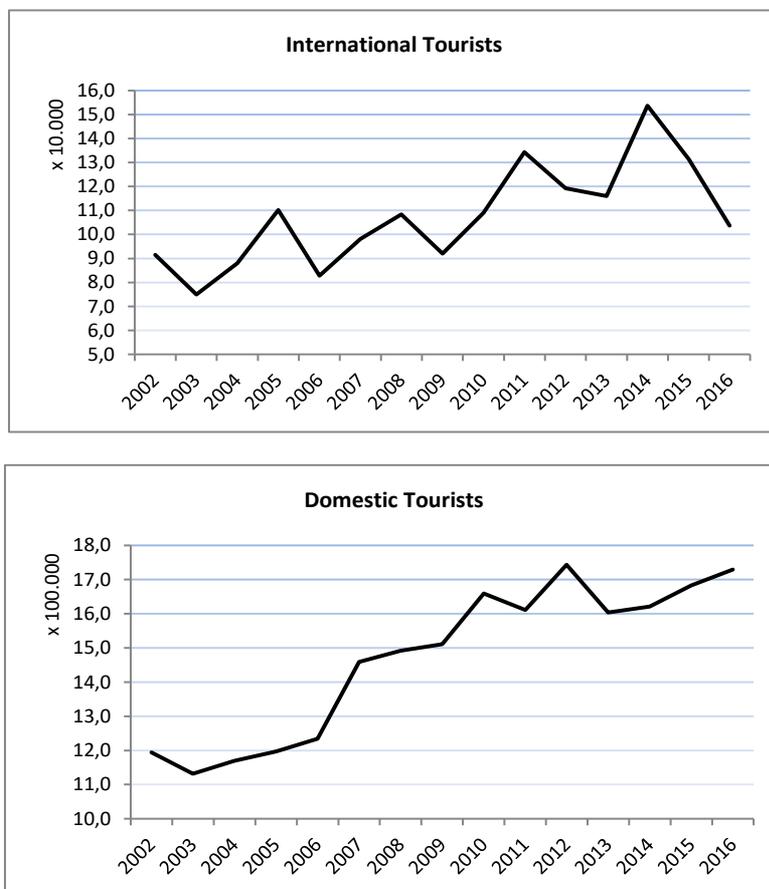
the target regions which have under-utilized potential and TST aims to improve winter tourism, faith tourism and nature-based tourism in the region to alleviate the development differences throughout the country. And, in this study, Eastern Anatolia was chosen to examine what to do to develop tourism and to have a competitive edge in the impoverished (least developed) regions and the data source was determined as travel agencies which also may reflect the opinions of tourists.

Eastern Anatolia is one of the seven geographical regions of Turkey. The region has borders with Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan (Nakhichevan), Iran and Iraq. The region is the largest one in territorial borders but has the lowest population density. The surface area of region is approximately 164.000 km<sup>2</sup> which represents 21% of Turkey. Mountains and plateaus are the major geographical forms. Mount Ağrı (Ararat), the second highest peak of European countries (after Mount Elbrus in Russia) is in the region. In winters, it is the coldest zone of Turkey and has generally dense snowy grounds, while the spring and autumn are the wettest periods. The annual average temperature is about 10 °C (Turkish State Meteorological Service, 2016) and continental climate is dominant.

The population of the region is approximately 4.3 million (population of Turkey is about 78.8 million) (TUIK, 2016). Though the natality is high in the region (Daka, 2014; Kudaka, 2014; Serka, 2014), due to economic reasons and PKK terrorism (especially in southern rural parts of the region), emigration rate is high and population has been decreasing over the years. The region is non-industrialized and the main sources of income are agriculture and livestock.

7 geographic regions of Turkey are further divided into 12 sub-statistical regions (NUTS I), since Eastern Anatolia is large, it is divided into two statistic sub-regions (TRA and TRB). The region is one of the least developed zones of Turkey. By per capita GDP data of 2014, these sub-regions of Eastern Anatolia occupy the 10<sup>th</sup> (TRB) and 12<sup>th</sup> (TRA) ranks with 6338.8 \$ and 5961.2 \$, respectively (The average per capita GDP of Turkey is 12,112.4 \$ in 2014) (TUIK, 2017). Amongst the 14 Eastern Anatolian provinces, Elazığ is in the highest rank (39<sup>th</sup> among 81 Turkish provinces) in the study of the Socio-Economic Development Ranking Survey (SEGE) 2011 conducted by the Ministry of Development. However, 9 of the 15 provinces occupying the bottom ranks are located in the Eastern Anatolia Region (Ministry of Development, 2013).

While the average life span in the region is close to the average of Turkey, a large majority of the region's settlements occupy the last orders among the 81 provincial averages and it should be stated that the average life span expectancy of Turkey is lowered by the region (in western Turkey, the expected life span is about 81 years while the average of study field is approximately 77 years).



**Figure 2** Number of Domestic and International Tourists Visiting Eastern Anatolia (2002 – 2016)

**Source:** Raw data was obtained from Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism (2017b) and regulated by author.

## Tourism in Eastern Anatolia

Undisturbed and wild nature (as a positive consequence of non-industrialization), historical remains from different civilizations, multi-ethnic structure and different cultural assets create potential for tourism, especially nature based, thermal, winter, culture and faith tourism.

Being on the crossroad of Caucasia, Western Anatolia and Asia, the region has many remnants from different civilizations. For example, mosques (Ani Ebu'l Man-u Cehr Mosque, Erzurum Twin Minarets (Çifte Minare), Malatya Ulu Mosque), Georgian – Armenian or Russian cathedrals and churches (Akdamar Church, Ani Cathedral, 12 Apostles Church, Alexander Nevsky Cathedral), ruins and monumental buildings (Ağrı Ishakpasha Palace, Ani City Ruins, Kars Castle, Van Castle, Harput Castle, Bastions in Kars and Erzurum, etc.) or thermal resources (Erzurum Pasinler, Ağrı Diyadin), mountains for winter sports (Erzurum Palandöken, Kars Sarıkamış, Ardahan Yalnızçam, Erzincan Ergan) and rich flora and fauna within the national parks such as Munzur (Tunceli) or Ağrı Dağı (Mount Ararat) are some examples of the region's tourism assets.

Though the region has great potential, it cannot be utilized well enough. Figure 2 indicates that the visitors are mostly domestic and total amount of visitors is less than two million including region-based people who are visiting their families, relatives or friends too. The figures emphasize a slight increase in the number of visitors while the number of international tourists fluctuates and falls sharply in some years.

The number of tourists indicates that tourism is in “infancy” phase and not very competitive neither in the domestic nor in the international markets. In this respect, the study highlights the necessities to develop a sustainable and competitive destination and also can be “exemplary” for the destinations which have the similar conditions.

## METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in summer 2014 and a qualitative approach was employed because the purpose of the study was to examine thoroughly the issues related to policy planning and implementation (Jennings, 2001; Wang & Ap, 2013). The data were gathered through in-depth interviews with travel agencies. To determine the sample, the purposive sampling method allowing participants to be determined within pre-selected criteria (within the scope of the study, it was designated as organizing tours to region) was utilized (Coyne, 1997). Based on

the interviews with managers or owners of the regional tourism enterprises, 50 local or national travel agencies (3 from Ankara, 5 from Antalya, 24 from Istanbul, 10 from İzmir, 4 from Muğla and 4 from Trabzon) were determined, 44 of which accepted to meet and have interviews. The interviews, held between May and September 2014, were organized in the travel agencies' offices and the interviewees were owners, managers (general or department), or sales representatives. Every interview took around 45 minutes to one hour.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to be able to enlarge the interview in return for the responses of the interviewer and to collect more detailed data (Boukas and Ziakas, 2016). After literature review (Ashley & Jones, 2001; Christie, 2002) and the interviews with local private sector representatives and public officials, some preliminary questions were identified as follows;

- Do you organize tours to Eastern Anatolia?
- Do domestic or international tourists demand tours to Eastern Anatolia?
- What are socio-economic profiles of your customers visiting Eastern Anatolia?
- What comes first to your mind about Eastern Anatolia?
- What to do to develop a sustainable tourism in Eastern Anatolia?

To make the participants feel comfortable, the interviews were not tape recorded and the participants were informed about it. The data were gathered by taking notes (by 2 persons simultaneously) during the interviews. Then sentences were grammatically corrected without changing their meanings and the travel agencies were numbered as, “Participant 1, 2, 3... 44”. Thenceforth the transcripts were translated into English and all notes were read again to obtain a general sense of the data.

As methodological triangulation, the data gathered by interviews were checked through literature and although protection and management of tourism are emphasized in the planning literature frequently, it was found that participants have no statements about these issues. Later, data were coded by open coding (Strauss, 1987) and Nvivo 8.0 was used to analyze the data with a coding list grouped in conformity with the literature review (Table 1). As Ritchie and Lewis (2003) proposed, an iterative process was applied. When it was necessary, the original data were re-read to discover more facts in-depth (Wang & Ap, 2013) and the extra data which did not fit with the categories were alternatively coded.

To check the reliability, the results were canvassed with the literature and therefore it was assured that they have importance for the policy making and implementation (Boukas & Ziakas, 2016) for impoverished regions. Results are discussed in Findings section below.

**Table 1** Coding Frame for Identifying Factors Affecting Tourism Development

1.	Infrastructures
1.1.	Physical
1.2.	Institutional
2.	Human capital
2.1.	Training and certification
2.2.	Increasing local awareness
2.3.	Increasing capacity of locals
3.	Commercial activities,
4.	Promotion and marketing

## FINDINGS

Even though Turkey succeeded many steps in tourism, there are many lacks in tourism planning and implementation. Even though there are some efforts to spread the tourism from coastal zones to other regions (especially Black Sea and Eastern/Southeastern regions), and this spread creates particular improvements in people's lives (Göymen, 2000), regional inequalities constitute a major obstacle to tourism development (Tosun & Jenkins, 1996). According to Göymen (2000), tourism incentives aiming at spreading the tourism country-wide brought not only physical and economic benefits to the regions but also social benefits such as awareness in locals, increasing number of NGOs associated with locals and increasing governmental and municipal interest in tourism.

As a very popular discourse, great majority of travel agencies emphasize that tourism is one of "exits" of impoverished settlements. As many interviewers said "*impoverished regions have great potential and this potential lies beneath dusty areas*" (Participant 23), locals may benefit from this potential if the right steps are taken. And in this section, the right steps pointed out by travel agencies will be examined in the lights of literature.

Majority of the travel agencies declared that they have seasonal tours to the region. While some of them

have tours in winter (to skiing centers, especially to Erzurum Palandöken and Kars Sarıkamış) others have cultural and trekking tours in summer. Travel agencies generally prefer planes in winter and busses in summer as means of transportation.

While most of the travel agencies have tours directly to the region, some of tours are organized as a part of others (including Black Sea and/or South-eastern Anatolia regions or Caucasia). Thirty-four of 44 travel agencies remarked that they overnight in the region. A large majority of 34 travel agencies stay 3 or more nights in the region, but they travel throughout the region and they generally spend one night in provinces. This exhibits that agencies consider whole region as one destination. The popular cities included Kars, Erzurum, Van, and Ağrı. Other provinces were remarked as the stops for meals or short breaks. The participants declared that majority of the tourists demanding tours to Eastern Anatolia belong to middle, upper-middle or upper economic class.

The participants mainly see the region to be attractive for its natural and historical assets. Amongst the natural beauties Mount Ararat is the most famous one while Ani City Ruins and Akdamar Church are the most famous historical sites. Results indicate that the region is also known for skiing opportunities, since skiing centers (Sarıkamış, Palandöken) were specified often amongst the best known issues about Eastern Anatolia.

Another aspect uttered by participants is that the local products of the region are known. Honey, Kasar cheese (a type of cheddar cheese) are also declared as the first thing coming to mind about Eastern Anatolia. Even though not so frequently, social structure and cultural matters (such as; Dadaş -a portrayal for Erzurum citizens-, Kurdish culture or Caucasian Folkloric Dances) were also remarked.

Participants were also asked about their opinions what to do to improve tourism in the region. The replies reflect the literature but the priorities differ. With emphasis on the infrastructure too, participants highlighted promotion and PR mostly and stated that the activities should focus on lessening the negative image and underlining the potential of the region. The results are reviewed as follows in the appropriate order with coding;

### Infrastructure

As many participants indicate, improving infrastructure and attractive urban spaces (including recreational facilities -parks, art galleries, local folkloric shows-, food and beverage -especially authentic places

for local dishes- and entertainment facilities -local music and international bars, discos-) will affect not only the tourists' satisfaction but also the residents' lives positively. Previous studies (Çaha & Tutar, 2013) indicate that in underdeveloped regions, low quality urban life is one of the most important reasons for the migration of qualified labor force and locals.

Notwithstanding there are no direct references to tourism governance or organization in the expressions of the participants, the necessity of cooperation of public institutions among themselves and with non-governmental organizations and private sector is emphasized. *“There should be closer ties between regional authorities and tourism professionals and travel agencies, and also Travel Agencies Association. For travel agencies, tour guides or also academics; workshops, seminars or even symposiums should be arranged. Info tours should be organized more frequently (Participant 5). In addition, with emphasis of undeniable effect of the public services and officials in underdeveloped regions, they point out that public officials should also be more positive and professional in their approach to tourism. “..... and even the local authorities and decision makers (especially staff of governorate and municipalities) should be trained and guided about tourism industry” (Participant 34).*

In addition to intra-regional co-operation, it is stated that inter-regional and cross-border cooperation are important for tourism development. *“The region should benefit from being on the border zone. The joint tourism products, tours and even joint routes involving two or more countries may be very attractive” (Participant 32).*

### Human Capital

According to the participants, local people must be involved in planning and implementation process and they should be employed in tourism. To ensure the local involvement in tourism sector, people working directly or indirectly in tourism sector (staff of hotels, restaurants but also, taxi, minibus drivers, public officers, citizens) should be trained about basics of tourism.

*“The tradesmen dealt directly with tourists should be trained about the basics of tourism. Qualification of staff in tourism facilities should be increased and they should even behave as representatives of local culture, for example, when required, they may exhibit some folkloric shows” (Participant 28).*

*“The regional tourism policy should add something to locals. The strategic plans should embrace product differentiation, so customers*

*from higher economic class may be attracted. For tourism activities, the region is based on cultural assets; the other resources like ecotourism, faith tourism must be utilized. Trekking routes or religious routes should be designated. Moreover, the villages on these routes may be organized to serve to tourists” (Participant 32).*

Aligned with the contemporary tourism planning literature (Ashley & Roe, 2003; Boukas & Ziakas 2016; Wang & Ap, 2013), participants urged that awareness of local people towards tourist attraction should be increased. Participant 21 points out that *“awareness of the local people must be raised and they should be involved in tourism activities”* and participant 34 remarks that *“local people should be trained about the tangible and intangible assets they have”* and to increase the awareness participant 11 asserted that *“The academicians may have presentations about the hidden history and resources especially to local people. These presentations might be held in the villages near the touristic assets. Also, articles should be published in academic or popular journals about the historical sites and excavations”.*

### Commercial activities

While the previous studies (Lai et al., 2006; Wang & Ap, 2013) emphasized on the product/service quality, participants expressed the increase in variety, rather than quality. The capacity and diversification of tourism enterprises are also mostly underlined. Participants tell that especially more accommodation facilities should be built. This will provide a broader range of accommodation opportunities and also more favorable prices (Bitner 1992).

*“The prices of hotels are increasing so fast and sharply, it affects the costs of tours and consequently the demand decreases” (Participant 9), “new facilities must be built as soon as possible. New facilities will raise the competition and this will result in increasing the quality and decreasing the prices” (Participant 13).*

*“The capacity and quality of hotels are not enough, and they mainly serve as entertainment facilities at night, customers complain about it. Moreover, the restaurants which can serve to tourists are very few and general quality is low. “Controls about hygiene and quality must be held constantly” (Participant 11) and to achieve this “Tourism facilities (both accommodation and restaurants, and even local travel agencies) must employ certificated and qualified personnel. Provincial Directorate of Culture and Tourism must check these enterprises” (Participant 20).*

Since the most of the travel agencies use buses for transportation, they emphasized that public transportation opportunities for attractions should be increased and the physical conditions of roads should be improved as participant 15 said *“The transport sector has grown very little in the region. Firms have modern vehicles but the service quality is low. In addition, the quality of roads should be increased”*.

As mentioned above, the region is known for its local products, but participants complain that there is insufficiency for local product shops, neither souvenirs nor local dishes. *“The customers would like to experience the local cuisine. Restaurants should serve these dishes and also the families, especially the villagers, who are willing to produce and serve the local cuisine may be organized and the tours may be convinced to have meals in such places, if the places were real village houses, it would be nicer”* (Participant 30). That's why local products should be designed in authentic ways and the opening of qualified souvenir shops should be supported. In addition, the restaurants offering local tastes should be available, or at least they should be encouraged to add local dishes into their menus.

### Promotion and Marketing

Even though in the planning field it is stated to start with infrastructure, the travel agents were emphasizing the consciousness-building activities. Particularly, they indicate that such activities should concentrate on breaking the misperception that the region is not safe and there is a constant threat of terrorism. Therefore, a special importance should be given to info tours to journalists, travel agencies or society leaders and PR activities to reclaim the bad image about the security.

*The visitors have hesitations about the security. However, after tours, the guests admit the region is secure to all aspects, before booking they ask about the security issues. Therefore, the promotion must be done in a way to break this wrong image. For example, the news, serials, movies on TV or radio or in newspapers frighten people. Moreover, advertisement should be based on regional level, the promotion and PR activities which provinces are doing individually are not effective* (Participant 43).

### DISCUSSION

Although Turkey has succeeded great improvement in tourism sector and is in the top ten countries of tourist arrivals, its tourism sector has several problems. Turkey competes mainly for 3S tourism and new international destinations appear throughout the world. Turkey mainly focuses to strew tourism throughout

the country and to utilize it as a regional development instrument (Turkish Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2007a). Turkey also wishes to utilize tourism to solve inequalities, conflicts and terrorism within the country (Göymen, 2000) and it is particularly important for the least developed settlements. These positive impacts of tourism will contribute also to the competitiveness of the country.

It is necessary to identify the strengths and weaknesses to improve the competitiveness situation. As mentioned frequently in literature, an effective management requires proper matches between *“tourism resources and management strategies supported by tourism stakeholders, especially government and tourism industry managers”* (Gomezelj & Mihalic 2008; 294). Understanding the weaknesses and priorities of the less developed regions is a key element to utilize the potential, not only in Turkey but also in other similar destinations.

Although studies on destination management and competitiveness are abundant, very few of them have assessed travel agencies' perspectives about the development of tourism. The current study was conducted to understand the opinions of travel agencies. The participants were determined in cooperation with the accommodation facilities operating in study field. The data were gathered via semi-structured interviews.

Results indicate that the region is already known for its natural endowments and gifts from previous civilizations. Domestic tourists form the majority of the visitors and travel agencies provide a comprehensive understanding of characteristics of tourism in Eastern Anatolia. The interviewed travel agencies offer traditional package tours and that's why they interact with the tourists directly and get their opinions about the region.

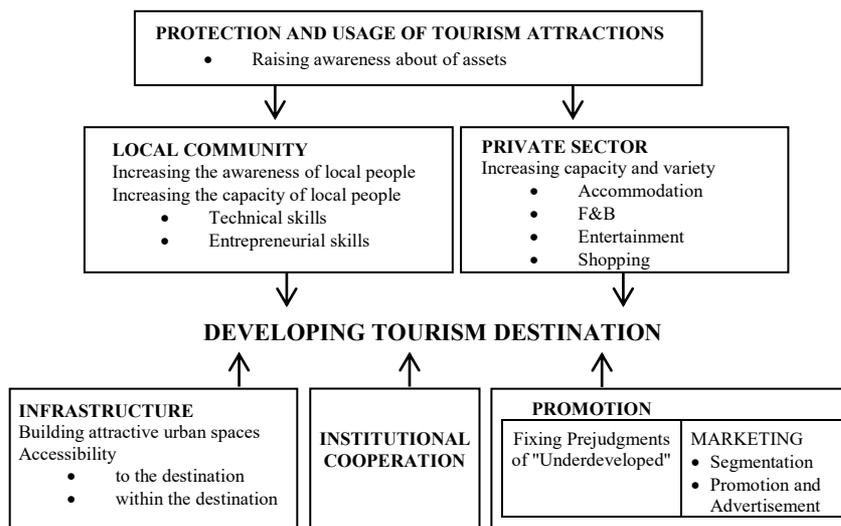
The results indicate that less developed regions may utilize tourism as a recovery instrument by taking right steps. Findings are similar with the literature and also some managerial conclusions. But, there are some basic differences. Results indicate that building a positive image in people's mind is as fundamental as building physical infrastructure. As an initial step to develop a destination image, negative perceptions about underdeveloped region should be eliminated and awareness of people should be raised that these regions are fresh and untouched and that there are lots to discover there. However, this study reveals that marketing and promotional efforts should be used in such a way that the negative perceptions caused from the word “underdeveloped” and the psychological distance of people must be eliminated. Subsequently, the word “underdevelopment” should be utilized and

promotional activities should emphasize the fact that the underdevelopment contributes to the authenticity and originality of tangible and intangible assets.

Moreover, to increase the involvement in all tourism development processes, the local people should also be informed about the potential they have. Probably, the most critical issue is that awareness and involvement of local people should be increased. They should partake in tourism planning and development.

environment or publishing informative documents. This can be grounded on the assumption that visitors may ignore service quality problems since they are aware of visiting an impoverished region (Çalışkan, 2015) and they care authentic culture and the discoveries of untouched nature.

The lack of any expression for the protection and management of tourism assets and/or environment, and the preparation of detailed informative documents



**Figure 3** Model for the First Steps towards Tourism Development in Underdeveloped Regions.

The planners and decision makers are responsible for providing better experiences for tourists and ensuring the increase in the local's quality of life by improving the natural and manmade environment and creating socio-economic gains. Authorities should build tourist friendly urban spaces, entertainment and recreational facilities, not only for tourists but also for their citizens. It can be also communicated that tourism may help local people to have better living spaces and this will create another reason for tourists to visit the region.

Similar to what Alipour (1996), Baid (2004), Cabanillas, Aliseda, Gallego & Jeong (2013); Zhao & Ritchie (2007), and many other scholars have stated, to characterize the fundamental requirements for tourism development, this study emphasizes the importance of capacity increase in physical (especially in tourism supply and urban spaces) and human resources while preserving authenticity. Moreover, the cooperation between the underdeveloped regions is important and necessary in terms of the improvements that each region cannot achieve alone.

However, there are no recommendations on protection and restoration of tourist attractions and

indicate that travel agencies should be informed about the importance of this issue. It can be interpreted that they regard assets only as commercial products. In this context, increase in the awareness of the private sector that their economic sustainability is based on effective management of tourism assets is core to have effective participation in planning and implementation process. This underlines the importance of participation of civil society and local people as much as that of private sector, so that participative approach would reflect multidimensional requirements of tourism. In brief, study offers the planning model shown in Figure 3:

In line with models of the Alipour (1996), Sinclair-Maragh & Gürsoy (2016), and Wang & Ap (2013), this model emphasizes the importance of institutional cooperation and local people's participation in planning.

Boers & Cottrell (2007) proposes that infrastructure and product/service supply is key component, therefore the assets must be protected to fulfil the market needs. Since the participants did not mention the protection of the attractions, the current model emphasizes that protection should be based also on raising awareness among locals and private sector, rather than on

demand-driven purposes only. Fazenda, da Silva & Costa (2010) also point out that increased technical capacity (without referring a raise in awareness of local people) and institutional cooperation have priority and advertising is necessary to increase the reputation of the destination. The proposed model stated that it is important for the local people to take part in the whole process and promotional activities focusing on the demolition of the prejudices about underdeveloped regions.

### Limitations

This study has limitations which may guide future studies. First, since the interviews were conducted in 2014, the findings may not reflect the changes occurring over time and the results need to be tested and updated with current studies. The current study focuses on the travel agencies having standard package tours. Therefore, travel agents which have private, VIP or individual tours should also be investigated and compared. Another limitation is that the travel agencies interviewed in the study bring domestic tourists to the region. The travel agencies which work with foreign tourists may be the focus of the future studies to understand the international perspectives.

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