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The Importance of Community Engagement for the Development of Rural Sacred Sites

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According to the partners of sacred places, there is growing evidence of the centrality of sacred places in community life www.sacredplaces.org. Crucial given their regional sustainable economic development potential (Enongene & Griffin, 2016). Thus, for both parties to tap in to these potentials, a collaborative approach, that engages all community stakeholders is essential in addressing their shared problem and providing practical and effective solutions to issues affecting their well-being. Essential given that Community engagement has been acknowledged as a powerful tool in the achievement of long-term sustainable outcomes. To buttress this argument, quite recently, there has been a growing awareness and recognition among religious and pilgrimage tourism scholars and their stakeholders of the importance of community engagement in the development of sacred sites at the international congress on religious and pilgrimage tourism, that took place on the 22-23 of November in Fatima in Portugal (UNWTO, 2017). Thus, community engagement is being idealised as an invaluable tool towards the sustainable development of sacred sites and their communities

Despite this acknowledgement, there is a lacuna of scholarly exploration of the importance of community engagement in the development of sacred sites, and more importantly rural-based sacred sites, that have historically suffered due to limited visitor numbers or tourism to these regions within the religious and pilgrimage tourism scholarship. Thus, representing a significant gap in literature the study seeks to fill, through an exploration of the importance of community engagement, in the development of rural-based sacred sites in the west of Ireland. In so doing, it explores the drivers, usefulness and success of these engagements in the sustainable development and management of these sacred sites.

In exploring this phenomenon, semi-structured in-depth interviews with key sacred site custodians and observational techniques were employed as primary data collection tools. Findings revealed the empowerment of a multiplicity of stakeholder groupings and their ability to play meaningful roles in the decision-making processes; deliberations and the implementation of sustainable initiatives, have led to remarkable success in the sustainable development and management of some rural-based sacred sites, however, highlighting the optimism with which some sacred site custodians view the future successes of the collaborative efforts in place towards the attainment of their long-term sustainable outcomes,

with regards to the development of the sacred resources, the environment, and the local communities in general.

Reference

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Partners for Sacred Sites: *Community Engagement and Asset-mapping* www.sacredplaces.org