

# Visitor management and stakeholder involvement as tools of Heritage Management in Aksum: Northern Ethiopia

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## Abstract

The sustainable management of what is irreplaceable and fragile national heritage is becoming a major challenge from different perspectives as important elements of human culture are vanishing. The major purpose of this study was to assess how the cultural heritage of Aksum is managed for their future sustainability from visitor management and stakeholder involvement stances. Primary data was collected from one hundred and fifty respondents. Findings of the study reveal that the sustainable management status of the cultural heritage of Aksum is facing different unique sets of problems which impact negatively on visitor experiences, lack of long term planning, the limited number of professionals, lagging behind in impact management, problems with stakeholder involvement and lack of cooperation. Thus, creating a platform for coordination among stakeholders, re-organization of the management model and the introduction of common practices of visitor management can be useful issues to attend to as a remedial action strategy.

**Keywords:** Aksum, Heritage Management, Stakeholder Involvement, Visitor Management.

## Introduction

Heritage stimulates respect and understanding of other cultures and as a consequence promotes peace and understanding (Sauerwein and Pechlaner, 2002; cited in Fontaine, 2005). It forms a crucial element of destinations and represents the chance to release potential for sustainable tourism on the condition that the cultural heritage is preserved and maintained properly. Sustainable heritage management encompass managing visitor impacts, ensuring adequate spending on maintenance, inclusion of stakeholders, appropriate interpretation, education and the development of sustainable management strategies (UNESCO, 2004). The involvement and co-operation of local and/or indigenous community representatives, conservationists, tourism operators, property owners and policy makers is necessary to achieve a sustainable tourism industry and enhance the protection of heritage resources for future generations.

At a time of increasing globalization, the sustainable management of the complex reality of cultural heritage from visitor management, stakeholder involvement and protection perspectives is a major challenge for present and future generations. This is important element of human culture which is vanishing at a hitherto unforeseen rate throughout the globe (Getty Trust, 1999; Mohamed, 2010; European Association for Heritage Interpretation, 2011). Fontaine (2005)

stated that heritage management needs to establish strategic planning whose central issue is a long-term plan view that looks at partnership, sustainable development, interpretation, and conservation and visitor management. Integrating conservation and valorization of cultural heritage in the domain of community development; education and tourism as well as encouraging access and knowledge; and conservation and promotion are helpful in raising awareness among communities on the importance of cultural heritage and involving the community in the management of the heritages (Australia's Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Center, 2008). As per to ICCROM (2000), the main problems facing the conservation of immovable cultural heritage in sub-Saharan Africa are outdated and ineffective legislations; lack of awareness among stakeholders on heritage management; problem of stakeholder involvement and coordination; incomplete inventories; illicit trafficking; and insufficient professionals and resources.

Ethiopia possesses the highest number of UNESCO World Heritage Sites on the continent. Ethiopia has also inscribed ten sites into the World Heritage List which are spread throughout the country. Ethiopia has a great deal to offer to the international arena when it comes to site significance and this will be if conservation, stakeholder involvement and management of the heritage are strengthened (Chernet, 2008). According to the World Bank (2006), much of the heritage of Ethiopia are being eroded by rapid development and urban growth. Accessibility to historical heritage sites, conservation, interpretations at historical heritage sites, and visitor information and quality of guides are among the problems which need urgent attention. Aksum is endowed with great cultural and historical heritage and such heritage is exposed to the above mentioned threats. Therefore, in this article the researcher has assessed the need for sustainable management of the cultural heritage in Aksum from visitor management and stakeholder involvement perspectives.

### **The Issues to Consider**

Heritage by its nature is unique, fragile and irreplaceable and requires sensitive use and management to make it the basis of tourism enterprises in a sustainable way. So, it is imperative to understand how to develop these sites sustainably while protecting and conserving them for the long term (Australia's Sustainable Tourism Cooperative Research Center, 2008).

Ethiopia has inherent potential to be top tourist destination in Africa through its abundance of heritages of many types that are almost unparalleled in the world. The leading motive for visiting Ethiopia is always stated as due to its cultural and historic heritage and the biggest challenge currently is the need to preserve the heritages in a sustainable and authentic way. Mitchell and Coles (2009) identified that the management of heritages in Ethiopia is much less successful and the state of public-private sector coordination is still poor. Short stayed visitors in Ethiopia are still aggravating existing environmental problems, pressure on the fragile economy and national resources, erosion of local customs, increase in beggars and theft of antiques and cultural property (Yechale, 2011). A study by Elene (2010) revealed that theft, illicit trade, vandalism, un-controlled land use and construction, sanitation problems, deterioration due to age, lack of appropriate maintenance, water infiltration, microbiological attacks, and shift towards more materialistic and foreign influenced culture are the main threats to the cultural heritage of Lalibela. Other studies conducted by Mekonnen (2008), Selam (2011), Yechale (2011) and others also pointed out issues of problems on heritage conservation and sustainable tourism focusing on Addis Ababa.

Tigray Culture and Tourism Agency has acknowledged that Aksum is still poorly promoted and conserved because of different hindering factors like limited infrastructure, unplanned growth in urban areas, poor management of tourist attraction sites, poor coordination among stakeholders and poorly conserved natural resources (Cannon, 2009). Irrespective of these drawbacks, continuous increment in number of visitors and infrastructural development is going on in Aksum which makes access easier for visitors and other development activities. This is both a necessary step and at the same time it will have a negative consequence on the site. On one hand, increment in tourists' flow brings more income and, on the other hand, uncontrolled tourism development will perhaps aggravate the deterioration of the heritage's values. It is only when the heritage is sustainably managed that tourism can be developed in a sustainable manner. The growing numbers of visitors, led to the need for management, the reduction of the physical impacts of recreation, and concerns about interactions between different stakes. But conservation and tourism planning for heritage places should ensure that the visitor experience will be worthwhile, satisfying and enjoyable.

Most of the studies conducted on Aksum focus on how to exploit the cultural heritage in Aksum through tourism so as to maximize the revenue. For example, Yemane (2011) has studied community based ecotourism as a livelihood option in Aksum, Gebreaninya (2011) has investigated socio-economic impact of tourism on Aksum while Alemayehu's (2012) study concentrates on the availability of tourism infrastructure in Aksum. The focus of most foreign scholars is still on the history of the town and new excavation works. Therefore, based on the assessment gaps and the continual increment of visitors to Aksum; it is a crucial step to assess the management of the cultural heritage of Aksum and disclose their prevailing problems for priority remedies which can pave the way to sustainable heritage and tourism management.

## **Objectives of the Study**

### *General Objective*

The overall objective of the study is to assess how visitor management and stakeholder involvement practices are used as tools of sustainable cultural heritage management in Aksum.

### *Specific Objectives*

- 1 To assess the involvement and coordination of stakeholders in the management of cultural heritage in Aksum.
- 2 To explore the practices of visitor management at Aksum's cultural heritage.
- 3 To assess the overall success of cultural heritage and tourism management in Aksum.

## **Methodology**

### *Description of the Study Area*

This study was conducted in the historical town of Aksum, which is the capital of the administrative zone of central Tigray. Aksum is situated at about 250 kilometers west of Mekelle. It has geographical coordinates of 14° 07' North latitude and 38° 44' East longitude. The town lies at an average altitude of 2138 meters above sea level. It receives 85.9 ml average rainfall and has a moderate type of climate which is conducive for different activities. Aksum is located west of Adwa, East of Wukro Maray, North of Edaga Selus and south of Rama (Aksum Town Planning and Finance Office, 2013). Aksum is considered as the holiest city in Ethiopia

and is an important destination of Orthodox Christian pilgrimages. The majority of the population (about 88%) is Orthodox Christian.

This study focused on the sustainable management of cultural heritage in Aksum and was mainly descriptive in its design, and its main rationale was to describe and interpret existing conditions, assess the processes that are in place and effects that are evident in relation to the management of the cultural heritage in Aksum. What was observed and understood by the researcher is described in the study. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to answer the questions of the study mainly through interviews, questionnaire completion by respondents and observation.

To achieve the objective of the study, data was collected from both secondary (books, journals, and websites and policy documents) and primary (questionnaire, in-depth interview, personal observation and informal discussions) sources by employing combined research methods of multiple data sources that include different activities. The subjects of the study were limited to the key stakeholders of heritage and tourism management in Aksum and include mainly tourism service providers, targeted professionals in tourism, church staff, guards of the heritage, and local community representatives and visitors.

To take a representative sample from the target population both probability (stratified and random) and non-probability (convenience and purposive) sampling designs were used. Probability sampling was used to take representative samples from the targeted population which helped to develop representative findings; whereas non-probability sampling was used to take informants who had deep knowledge about the issues under consideration and provide thorough discussion on the issues of concern. Since the population is heterogeneous, it was necessary to first target the population, which was then stratified into strata like tourism service providers, targeted professionals, church staff, security employees (heritage guards), local community representatives and visitors to have proper distribution as stated in table 1 below.

**Table 1: Summary of sample size of respondents**

No	Subjects		Sample selected		Remark
			Quantitative	Qualitative	
1	Service providers	Guides	60	3	
		Hotels			
		Artisanal Crafts			
2	Targeted professionals	Professionals at Culture and Tourism Agency Cluster Aksum and Aksum University	15	2	
3	Security employees	Heritage guards	-	5	
5	Church staff	Representatives from Aksum TSION church and Central Zone Diocese	-	5	
6	Local community representatives		-	5	
7	Visitors	Both international and domestic	75	-	
	Total		150	20	
Total sample(Quantitative + Qualitative) = <u>170</u>					

Source: Survey, 2015

Interviews were purposively conducted with guards of the heritage, church representatives, local community representatives, professionals of Culture and Tourism Agency Cluster Aksum,

guides from Aksum Tour Guides' Association and artisanal crafts based on their knowledge and responsibility to get detail clarification on the issues. The size of interviewees was determined based on the maturity/saturation of data and the level to which triangulated data was found.

## Findings and Discussion

### *Demographic Characteristics of Respondents*

To collect the necessary data, 200 questionnaires were distributed to the sampled quantitative respondents of the study and only 150 (75%) were returned and used for analysis. Accordingly, 15 questionnaires were randomly distributed to professionals, which then yielded (100%) response rates as clearly indicated in table 2.

**Table 2: Demographic characteristics of professional respondents**

Variables	Categories of responses	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	13	86
	Female	2	14
	Total	15	100
Education	BA/BSc	13	86
	MA/MSc and above	2	14
	Total	15	100
Place of work	Culture and Tourism Agency Cluster Aksum	4	27
	ESTDP	2	13
	Lecturer	9	60
	Total	15	100

Source: Survey, 2015

Next, 60 questionnaire were collected from service providers using proportional sampling and finally used for analysis. This can be clearly deduced from table 3 below.

**Table 3: Demographic characteristics of service provider respondents**

Variables	Categories of responses	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	45	75
	Female	15	25
	Total	60	100
Age range	Less than 31	20	33
	From 31 to 40	15	25
	From 41 to 50	10	17
	From 51 to 60	10	17
	Above 60	5	8
	Total	60	100
Level of education	Diploma	21	35
	First degree	16	27
	Church education	10	17
	Secondary school	8	13
	Elementary school	5	8
	Total	60	100
Job category	Artisanal work/ handcraft	24	40
	Tour guide	22	37
	Hotel manager/owner	14	23
	Total	60	100

Source: Survey, 2015

Lastly, 100 questionnaires were distributed to visitors. These 100 visitors were simply taken by convenience sampling and only 75 (75%) were returned and used for analysis as can be deduced from table 4.

**Table 4: Demographic characteristics of visitors**

Variables	Categories of responses	Frequency (F)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	50	67
	Female	25	33
	Total	75	100
Age range	Less than 31	17	23
	From 31 to 40	12	16
	From 41 to 50	16	21
	From 51 to 60	22	29
	Above 60	8	11
	Total	75	100
Educational level	Masters	22	29
	PhD and above	20	27
	First degree	30	40
	Diploma	3	4
	Total	75	100
Purpose of visit	Learning culture and history	70	85.4
	Research	29	35.4
	Recreation	17	20.7
	Visiting friends and relatives	13	15.9
	Nature	13	15.9
	Business tourism	7	8.5
	Total	75	100

Source: Survey, 2015

#### *Practices of Visitor Management in Aksum*

According to the data stated by World Federation of Tourist Guides Association (2009) and analysis of documents from Ethiopian Cultural Heritage Project, visitor management strategy is not still developed in Aksum and even there are no common practices of managing visitors, where there is flow of about 20,000 foreign tourists per year and about 100,000 to 150,000 local pilgrimages staying overnight in Aksum making most taxing on heritages and facilities during major religious festivals (especially during St. Mary's feast, Palm Sunday and Epiphany festivals). Tourism cause environmental degradation in Axum specially in religious ceremonies' such as Hdar Zion, Awsana, Ethiopian Epiphany, because the number of visitors exceeds the environment can comfortably hold. In such phenomena tourism especially mass tourism causes environmental degradation and over utilization of resources (Gebreaninya, 2011).

In fact at present, the number of visitors to Aksum is not that much high compared to its resources except the peak festivals and visit by different groups. However, more tourists are expected to increase in the near future because of its status of being world heritage site and the recent attention given by the Ethiopian government for tourism development. Hence, visitor

management strategy developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders and application of common practices to manage visitors for the special religious events in particular and the whole year in general is crucial.

**Table 5: Professionals’ responses on visitor management and sustainability issues**

Indicator Phrases	Relative Response										Mean
	VP		PR		AV		GD		VG		
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Statistics of visitors to Aksum			2	13	12	80	1	7			2.83
Actual control of visitors at fragile areas and during peak times			13	87	2	13					2.16
Applying carrying capacity concept	16	84.2	3	15.8							1.16
Availability of visitor experiences and facilities			13	87	2	13					2.16
General evaluation on the practice of sustainable visitor management			8	53	7	47					2.47

VP = Very Poor, PR= Poor, AV= Average, GD= Good, VG= Very Good, F =Frequency, % = Percentage *Source:* Survey, 2015

As articulated in table 5, 80 % (mean=2.83) of the professional respondents replied that the practice of documenting and having visitor statistics in Aksum is average. The statistics of the visitors (nationality, purpose of visit, age etc) is recorded when they purchase entrance ticket to the heritages and satisfaction survey of visitors is conducted by the Regional Culture and Tourism Agency every four months. But the problem here is that the statistics and survey are most of the time used simply for reporting the results to the concerned bodies and they are rarely used as bases for future planning, expansion and management practices. In terms of visitor statistics, merely asking the total number of visitors will not be sufficient in identifying whether the destination is likely to have visitor use problems due to high tourist numbers as visitor behavior is rarely homogenous. It is also demonstrated that the practices of actual control of visitors during peak times/religious festivals and application of carrying capacity concept are poor and very poor. Everyone with a ticket enters into the heritage areas without any management thereof. The carrying capacity of the sites is not yet studied and the heritage sites are accommodating beyond their capacity especially during major festivals and different group visits like the visits of “know your country clubs” and university students. The researcher practically observed that visitors want to stay out (especially at the underground tombs and the museums) only when they think that it is highly crowded and can cause problem for their health such as suffocation. It is also common to observe visitors touching and moving different sensitive treasures in the museums, which is of course, not acceptable at all.

Most of the negative impacts of visitors on heritage are mainly focused around the areas that currently experience the most tourist traffic like the main stela field and the processional street mainly around the perimeter of the church zone. From witnessing the ceremony of Tsion Mariam, it is all too evident that at these times, all available space is used up. So, different activities like repaving the area between the old and new Tsion Mariam Cathedrals, filling the redundant reservoirs at the foot of the bell tower; removal of visual clutters like the telephone poles; preparing sitting areas and others need to be undertaken with the collaboration of the church and other stakes to provide additional much needed gathering, prayer and rest space for pilgrims.

Generally, 53% of the respondents have assessed the practices of sustainable visitor management in Aksum as poor. Interventions on heritage development and management to

attract new types of visitors may be interested in trekking or events planned throughout the year are very low in Aksum. Although there are different churches that can be included into the tour itinerary (example Arbatu Ensessa, Enda Eyesus and Abune Penteleon), TSION church is still the only church included in itineraries. Interconnected marketable events, shopping opportunities, new sports and entertainment choices, new services to evoke the town's very deep religious heritage, interpretations to celebrate some of the historical events of past empires and rulers and others are still wanting in Aksum. Other critical issues noted here are the cases of entrance fees and free entrance letters. The entrance fee to all the heritage sites of Aksum (excluding the church) is only four birr for Ethiopians and fifty birr for foreigners. The entrance fee to the church is not that costly when compared to other world heritage sites. It is only twenty birr for Ethiopians and two hundred birr for foreigners. Most of the respondents said that although the minimum entrance fee can be good to attract more visitors and develop the habit of visit by Ethiopians, the entrance fees fixed in Aksum are insignificant for a town which is full of heritage. Visitors undermine the outstanding value of the heritage site and this is worsened by a negligible fee which creates an impression that is not an important site.

**Table 6: Service providers' responses on visitor management and its sustainability**

Indicator Phrases	Relative Response										Mean
	VP		PR		AV		GD		VG		
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Practice and commitment to have data about customers/tourists	22	25	43	48.9	17	19.3	6	6.8			2.08
Application of carrying capacity concept	42	47.7	42	47.7	4	4.5					1.57
Availability of visitor experiences and facilities	22	25	43	48.9	17	19.3	6	6.8			2.08
General evaluation on the practices of sustainable visitor management concept	33	37.5	45	51.1	10	11.4					1.74

VP = Very Poor, PR= Poor, AV= Average, GD= Good, VG= Very Good, F =Frequency, % = Percentage

Source: Survey, 2015

As demonstrated in table 6 , the service providers' responses illustrates that the practices of having data about their visitors, the application of carrying capacity concept and even the overall evaluation of visitor management practices in Aksum are scaled below average (poor and very poor). Most respondents replied that although it is good for them to document the profile of their customers by themselves which can help them for future preparation and specialization, the nature of their routine work and their capacity do not permit to perform such activities daily. So, it was better if the Cluster Culture and Tourism Agency and other responsible organs take the lead in distributing the statistics of visitors, their demand and satisfaction/dissatisfaction level to the service providers which can serve as a benchmark for the service providers. For the long term, training and experience sharing have irreplaceable roles.

**Table 7: Visitors' responses on visitor management and its sustainability issues**

Indicator Phrases	Relative Response										Mean
	VP		PR		AV		GD		VG		
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Actual control of visitors at fragile areas and peak times			34	41.5	41	50	7	8.5			2.67
Carrying capacity concept			38	46.3	30	36.6	14	17.1			2.71
Availability of different visitor experiences	4	4.9	61	74.4	17	20.7					2.16
General evaluation on the practice of sustainable visitor management			32	39	45	54.9	5	6.1			2.67

VP = Very Poor, PR= Poor, AV= Average, GD= Good, VG= Very Good, F =Frequency, % = Percentage Source: Survey, 2015



The responses of surveyed visitors in table 7 above still show the prevalence of problems in the management of visitors to Aksum. But compared to professionals' and service providers' responses, visitors have scored almost all of the questions visitor management practices as average except the availability of different visitor experiences and facilities. Such visitor responses may be influenced by the fact that this research was conducted during the off/low season of the study area and the sampled visitor respondents may not get the chance to look at crowd of visitors and their impact on the cultural heritages during their visit to the heritages and stay in Aksum. What they have stated as the critical problem is the lessened availability of different experiences and services which is highly related to their personal experience and satisfaction preferences. From this, it can be deduced that the different experiences and facilities in different areas such as the hospitality area, cultural performances, security and safety, merchandizing have plenty of shortcomings. There is no real and effective management looking at the needs and wants of the tourists and the heritage itself, and trying to make things more attractive and successful is not a consideration.

The present system of arranging a tour guides' association office at the gate of the main stelae field and the ticket office at the town with in the office of the cluster, are also taken to be inflexible, misleading, less diversified and hindrances in the management and satisfaction of visitors. It is common in Aksum to look for independent visitors who are returning from the heritage sites to the actual town or sending children with money to purchase entrance tickets because of the highly inflexible and less diversified ticketing system which exists and which quite frankly, is unacceptable as such.

Weak practices of designating specific fields for visitors, abstaining from using empty houses and schools for overnight accommodation, shortage of portable and fixed toilets, problems of traffic management, lack of coordinated work of security employees (Example, heritage guards and police force), lack of consistent signage and lack of well organized alternative observances to ease the condense of the major festivals are still among the repeatedly stated drawbacks by professional, service provider and visitor respondents during the major festivals and such drawbacks aggravate the dissatisfaction of customers and the negative impacts on the sensitive cultural heritages of the area. To adjust and remedy such problems, continuous capacity building in areas such as coordination and conducting experience sharing programs, and taking good practices from other areas (Example, Tourism Police in Gondar) are vital.

#### *Stakeholder Involvement in the Management of Cultural Heritage*

Pederson (2002) explains that involving stakeholders in the management of heritage has several advantages including saving resources, preventing of delays and blocking of projects, helping people to understand easily misunderstood cultural differences, identifying problem areas that could have been overlooked by experts and provide useful input regarding desired conditions at a site. In a way which is compatible to get such advantages of stakeholder involvement, in the proclamation No.209/2000 of the ARCCH (2000), it is stated that "the protection and preservation of the cultural heritage to enable the next generation to acquire profound awareness of its culture is the responsibility of each citizen, society and the state".

The Tourism Development Policy of Ethiopia (2009) still stated community participation and partnership among stakeholders as one of the basic principles to guide Ethiopian tourism development. Based on such directives, the practical awareness, involvement, cooperation and capacity of the key stakeholders in the management of the cultural heritages of Aksum for their future existence and current usage are discussed in this part based on the gathered data.

**Table 8: Professionals' responses on stakeholder awareness, cooperation and capacity**

Indicator Phrases	Relative Responses										Mean
	VP		PR		AV		GD		VG		
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Awareness of key stakeholders	1	5.3	6	31.6	9	47.4	3	15.8			2.74
Involvement of key stakeholders	2	10.5	8	42.1	9	47.4					2.37
Cooperation among stakeholders			17	89.5	2	10.5					2.11
Access to professionals	2	10.5	8	42.1	9	47.4					2.37
Capacity development programs for stakeholders			5	26.3	14	73.7					2.74

VP\* = Very Poor, PR= Poor, AV= Average, GD= Good, VG= Very Good, F =Frequency, % = Percentage Source: Survey, 2015

As revealed in table 8, awareness of key stakeholders and capacity development programs for stakeholders are scaled as average with mean value of 2.74 each. It is affirmed that the stakeholders have enduring awareness about the heritages beginning from ancient times and are proud of the heritages. But it was also noticed that the current awareness programs especially for the young generation are not that much rewarding. It is also articulated that the cluster tourism office in cooperation with other stakeholders like UNESCO and different educational institutions like Aksum University is trying to give some capacity development training programs mainly for hotels and guides. Especially for guides, short term trainings are given at least once in a year.

The actual involvement of the key stakeholders and their cooperation are considered to be poor that can undermine the awareness and capacity development programs' scales. Most of the local stakes' including the local community's practical involvement in externally and self-funded conservation activities of the heritages is still poor. Although most residents recognize the value of their ancient heritage for bringing tourists to the area and sign of their identity, a real relationship with their past and continuity is more imprecise. The involvement and cooperation of local academicians is poor/even mostly non-existent in Aksum. Most of the archaeological excavations and researches are done by foreigners and such individuals/institutions do not think about involvement of domestic staff, continuity of excavation, publishing of results and development of the sites next to excavation after they finish their mission. There look also problems of coordination and lack of clear responsibility description among different organs of tourism and heritage at different levels, and this may be due to lack of clearly stated management systems of the heritage areas and the responsibilities of these different governmental structures in this regard. The lack of clear idea for different stakeholder numbers and levels of involvement, domination of tourism benefits by a few individuals, the rudimentary and unclear hierarchical structures of concerned governmental organs and resource shortages are among the stated challenges in stakeholder involvement, cooperation and capacity development programs.

**Table 9: Service providers' responses on stakeholder awareness, involvement and cooperation**

Indicator Phrases	Relative Responses										Mean
	VP		PR		AV		GD		VG		
	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	
Awareness of stakeholders	4	4.5	49	55.7	35	39.8					2.32
Involvement of stakeholders	26	29.5	62	70.5							1.59
Cooperation	43	48.9	45	51.1							1.3
Capacity development programs for	54	61.4	34	38.6							1.26

stakeholders										
Access to professionals	26	29.5	62	70.5						1.59
The contribution of your business to the overall sustainable management of cultural heritages in Aksum	37	42	36	40.9	15	17				1.75

VP = Very Poor, PR= Poor, AV= Average, GD= Good, VG= Very Good, F =Frequency, % = Percentage *Source:* Survey, 2015

Maintaining communities' and other stakes' sense of ownership and attachment throughout the heritages is crucial for successful heritage conservation and management activities in the long run as such agents are the actual guardians of the heritages. But the service providers' responses in table 9 above disclose that only stakeholder awareness with mean value 2.32 is scaled as poor. The remaining other issues are severely scaled as very poor with mean values of 1.59, 1.3, 1.75 and 1.26 for stakeholder involvement, cooperation, business's contribution and capacity development programs respectively.

Data collected from the interviews and informal discussions of the service providers proved that almost all businesses directly or indirectly related with tourism and heritage are not focusing on the sustainability of the heritage of Aksum which is in any event, the base for their businesses. Everyone thinks only about the daily benefit that can be exploited through tourism. The guides think only about conducting two or more group tours per day and even the souvenir shops try to sell their products by making false statements and even sometimes by selling what are original irreplaceable heritage artifacts. Fund initiations to contribute to the sustainability of the heritages which are the founding blocks of business are not practiced in Aksum. A novel idea stated by some respondents was that to form a "Heritage and Tourism Fund" to be managed by representatives from all tourism service providers in cooperation with the responsible office and every service provider will contribute a given amount of money/kind based on specified intervals through their association or individually. Later this can be expanded to include the whole public and every external volunteer. Finally, this fund can serve as a major source of budget to conserve and manage the heritages for their sustainability.

Associations of service providers and other agents can play greater roles in helping their members to provide competent and compatible services. But in Aksum, except for the Guides' Association, all the other tourism service providers do not have formalized functional associations. The assessment from the artisanal works reveals very poor coordination among them, and also with the cluster's culture and tourism agency, hotels and other stakeholders. Lack of capacity development programs, the problem of market network (most guides take the tourists only to selected shops), the lack of enough working space (most souvenir shops are in very narrow house rents), the problem of follow up on authenticity and integrity of artisanal works by concerned bodies, the expansion of 'me too' products, and unbalanced competition (most of the tourists go to purchase artisanal works in the local travel agents who also own their own handcraft and jewelry shops) are amongst the frequently acknowledged problems faced by the artisanal work. Such problems can be minimized by forming a strong organized association, providing of a continuous capacity for development and constructing artisanal work centers or complexes, so that visitors can select for themselves. The service providers can also compete to provide the most authentic and destination specific products as desired by visitors

Critical problems exist concerning the tour guides although some training programs are organized by different bodies like UNESCO, the Cluster Office and other institutions, such programs are always scheduled during peak season periods when guiding jobs are plenty. They are mainly not well organized and post-training follow-ups are noticeably absent.

During my interview with the local informants, all of them replied that the local community is not always consulted and involved during any tourism development and conservation activities. They stated that someone from UNESCO, Authority for Research and Conservation of Cultural Heritages or other office come and finish every activity without consulting and involving the actual owners of the heritages (the locals). Only those very few individuals who are currently benefiting more from tourism get information about such activities. Even the local cluster agency of culture and tourism is very weak and less committed in involving locals, as it lacks dynamism, creativity and attention.

Evidence was also revealed about the very poor cooperation between the church and the responsible tourism related governmental and non-governmental offices. An informant from the Central Zone Diocese reacted by saying that “the current restoration activity of the monastery within the church compound is without consultation of the central zone diocese which shows the weak cooperation of the diocese with other tourism and heritage related key stakes”. Most of the guards, police and the church representatives approached also stated that the cluster agency is too weak and it needs reorganization. Generally, it is easy to deduce that the cluster agency, the regional agency and other federal offices are not able to create an environment for multi-level stakeholder cooperation by creating awareness and dialogue. Informants from the Cluster Office also recognize such weak follow up and coordination.

Visitors were also asked to forward their perception on the general awareness and involvement of stakeholders in the management and usage of cultural heritages in Aksum that they observe during their stay in Aksum. Hence 74.4% of the visitors scored it as poor. The remaining 11.5% and 14.1% have scored it as very poor and average respectively. This was supported by the result that 84.1% of the surveyed visitor respondents’ did not perform any interactive performance by involving locals and other stakeholders and do not even take part in any cultural event. This implies that the cultural events or displays of heritages in Aksum are not properly identified, developed and promoted. During my informal talk with a French tourist, he affirmed that he regarded Aksum essentially as “a tourist town where the people who live there don’t seem involved and care about their heritage”. But heritage management is a community driven activity and community participation in decision making, interpretation, benefit sharing and others is must for sustainability and better success of the heritage of the area.

### Success of Sustainable Cultural Heritage and Tourism Management

Table 10: Success of sustainable cultural heritage and tourism management

Do you think that sustainable cultural heritage and tourism management in Aksum is successful?	Professionals		Service providers		Visitors	
	F	%	F	%	F	%
Yes			6	12.5	10	14.6
No	13	89.5	50	76.1	53	67.1
Don't know	2	10.5	4	11.4	12	18.3
Total	15	100	60	100	75	100

F =Frequency, % = Percentage

Source: Survey, 2015

The potential and actual development of heritage tourism in Aksum is stated as “two extremes” by the coordinator of Culture and Tourism Agency Aksum Cluster. He further explained that Aksum is rich in heritages (mainly cultural and historical) but such potential heritages are not changed to actual heritages and are suffering from different natural and manmade challenges.

It is also reflected by most of the surveyed respondents that although it is a world heritage site, sustainable cultural heritage and tourism management in Aksum is not successful due to several bottlenecks which exist. Limitations are related to the number and capability of professionals; minimum attention to community-based tourism; the problem of legal system to retain revenue from entrance fees at local level; short term profit oriented service providers; weak organizational structure and poor capacity of the cluster agency; problems of variety and quality in visitor experiences; problems of stakeholder involvement and cooperation; lack of organized interpretation and presentation and lack of funds are the main problems hindering success.

The development of a community-based tourism that addresses current inequalities in tourism development and benefit sharing is required by which communities can be aided in assessing their tourism assets, positioning their products in terms of quality and authenticity, and anticipating potential adverse impacts on the heritage is a good requirement to get the help of the general public in the overall sustainable management and development of the cultural heritage in Aksum. Strict regulations and follow-ups are also a must during and after giving license to service providers, as only few individuals are dominating the whole tourism business. Such individuals are also becoming unnecessary bottlenecks in the development of community based tourism.

A local informant expressed the following: *“In Aksum, it is very difficult to start new business in tourism nowadays, especially for the poor. The already previously involved and financially matured tourism business owners use their maximum capacity to block every gap for new entrants. But if you are lucky to win such challenges and able to start a small business, it will be easy for you to expand your small business in to different tourism related businesses. That is why the existing financially matured handcraft and jewelry shops and hotels are also working as local travel agents”.*

Such ideas were also reflected during my informal discussion with new graduates of tourism studies who are invariably also licensed guides, but it becomes very difficult for them to break into the practical guiding services because of different informal blockages which appear in the actions of the existing guides who simply keep the work for themselves.

## **Conclusions**

Different tools can be employed to manage heritage in a sustainable manner among which visitor management, stakeholder involvement and partnership are the core tools of assessment used in this study. Such tools are strongly interrelated to each other. Based on the assessment of the tools, many of the cultural heritage aspects of Aksum are found in poor condition of sustainability and vulnerable to threats. Aksum is found to be below average in status in applying effective visitor management practices. The carrying capacity of the sites is not studied and no common practices are applied to manage visitors during major festivals and group visits. So, it can be concluded that crowd management linking actions between demand, destination and heritage management for the sake of fulfilling the interests of visitors, the heritage and other involved bodies in a compatible way is still lacking in Aksum and requires urgent attention. The awareness, involvement, cooperation and capacity of stakeholders in the sustainable management of the heritage of Aksum is also subject to different limitations and impreciseness. A French tourist stated this as “Aksum seems a tourist town where the people who live there don’t seem involved and care about their heritage.” Most business related stakeholders are not focusing on the sustainability of the heritage of Aksum and they simply think about the daily benefits that can be exploited for personal use from tourism. The needed involvement and

cooperation of local academicians is also poor and mostly non-existent and most of the archaeological excavations and researches are conducted by foreigners. Thus, it can be concluded that the cluster agency, the regional agency and other federal offices are not able to create an environment for multi-level stakeholder involvement and cooperation by creating dialogue and other dynamic platforms.

Collectively, the sustainability of heritage resources and tourism in Aksum is facing many challenges and unfavorable factors. These include the lack of effective long term planning, uncoordinated development, a limitation in the number and capacity of professionals, scant attention to community based heritage and tourism management, problems in variety and quality of visitor experiences, problems with stakeholder involvement and cooperation, lack of organized interpretation and presentation, and finally and most critically, a huge limitation when it comes to all type of resources.

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