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Economic Empowerment within the Realm of Community-Based Tourism: A Case Study of Mkhuhlu, South Africa

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Abstract

This study examined the role of Community-Based Tourism Initiatives (CBTIs) in addressing poverty and unemployment, assessing community participation, and evaluating associated benefits and challenges in Mkhuhlu, South Africa. A qualitative design was adopted, employing seven in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions with residents, with data analysed through thematic content analysis (TCA). Findings reveal that CBTIs generate tangible benefits, including temporary employment, entrepreneurial opportunities, supplementary household income, and the preservation of cultural heritage. However, systemic barriers such as weak governance, lack of accountability, financial instability, exclusion from decision-making, and seasonal fluctuations significantly constrain long-term sustainability. In practice, CBTIs require a transition towards community-centred models that institutionalise transparent governance and equitable benefit-sharing. At the policy level, there is a need to strengthen institutional frameworks and foster inclusive multi-stakeholder partnerships. The study contributes theoretically by applying Social Exchange Theory (SET) to a rural South African context, illustrating how trust, reciprocity, and perceptions of fairness shape community participation. Its broader value lies in underscoring governance and participation as decisive factors for transforming CBTIs into sustainable drivers of rural empowerment and resilience.

Keywords: Community-based tourism; economic empowerment; social exchange theory; governance; rural development

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Introduction

Tourism is a key driver of global economic growth, contributing to employment creation and infrastructure development (United Nations World Tourism, 2019). In South Africa, a nation celebrated for its diverse cultures, landscapes, and wildlife, the sector remains a cornerstone of socio-economic development (South African Tourism, 2021). It makes notable contributions to GDP and employment levels, demonstrating its importance to the national economy (Statistics South Africa, 2022). Community-Based Tourism Initiatives (CBTIs) have emerged as part of broader community development strategies aimed at enabling rural communities to manage tourism resources with active resident involvement (National Department of Tourism, 2021). These initiatives are designed to generate local economic growth, reduce unemployment, and address poverty, thereby advancing Sustainable Development Goal 1. Beyond their economic impact, CBTIs are recognised for promoting social and environmental benefits in rural settings (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019). However, their effectiveness depends on residents' awareness of the opportunities and benefits created by such initiatives (Ryu et al., 2019).

The study is guided by three interrelated objectives: (a) to assess the role of Community-Based Tourism Initiatives (CBTIs) in addressing poverty and unemployment, (b) to examine the extent and nature of community participation, and (c) to explore both the benefits and challenges associated with these initiatives. Through these objectives, the study aims to generate a comprehensive understanding of the factors that shape the effectiveness of CBTIs in promoting sustainable rural development. A critical gap exists in understanding how residents perceive the costs and benefits of participating in CBTIs, and how trust and reciprocity, core elements of Social Exchange Theory (SET) influence their willingness to engage. This study addresses that gap by analysing residents' perspectives on tourism initiatives in Mkhuhlu, thereby contributing to the discourse on sustainable rural tourism development. The study area falls within the Pretoriuskop Sour Bushveld vegetation zone of the Lowveld Bioregion, in the wider Savannah Biome (Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, 2020). It is one of the primary settlement zones under the Bushbuckridge Local Municipality. Mkhuhlu has been characterised as a rapidly growing community with expanding commercial activity, although its industrial base remains largely dormant (Bushbuckridge Nodal Development Profile, 2017). Its location along the Skukuza/Kruger tourism route presents opportunities for local tourism development through contributions to the value chain, including arts and crafts, hospitality services, and service stations situated along key wildlife tourism corridors.

Open Rubric

Literature review

SET and community-based tourism

SET has become a central framework in tourism research for explaining residents' support or opposition to tourism initiatives. Agboola et al. (2024) contend that tourism development significantly shapes residents' socio-economic conditions, influencing their quality of life and participation in tourism initiatives. The theory views human interactions as exchanges in which individuals evaluate perceived rewards against associated costs, sustaining relationships when benefits outweigh negative outcomes (Ap, 1992; Cook, 2015; Cropanzano et al., 2017). Within tourism contexts, SET highlights how residents' attitudes are shaped by the distribution of tangible and intangible benefits such as employment, infrastructure, cultural pride, and social cohesion relative to costs, including environmental degradation, cultural commodification, and inequitable benefit-sharing (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2015; Ahmad et al., 2023). This framing underscores reciprocity, fairness, and trust as key determinants of sustained community participation in tourism. CBTIs align closely with the assumptions of SET, as they are premised on reciprocal relationships between communities and tourism stakeholders. CBTIs are particularly prominent in rural contexts, where they are promoted as mechanisms for stimulating economic growth, creating employment, and advancing sustainable development (NDT, 2023). Since the 1980s, CBTIs have been integrated into the development strategies of many countries in the Global South, emphasising community empowerment through capacity building, cultural tourism routes, and partnerships with local authorities (Zielinski et al., 2020; Archer et al., 2005; Van Broeck et al., 2019).

Scholars situate CBTIs within broader alternative tourism models such as pro-poor tourism, community-based enterprises, and eco-tourism, each of which seeks to redistribute benefits equitably and empower local communities (Saayman & Giampiccoli, 2015). Fundamentally, CBTIs aims to give residents ownership of resources, participation in decision-making, and access to livelihood opportunities (Mensa, 2019). SET provides a useful lens to understand these dynamics, as it explains why residents remain engaged in CBTIs when they perceive benefits to be fair, and why resistance emerges when exchanges are seen as exploitative or one-sided participatory gaps and governance Challenges. Despite their prospective benefits, CBTIs often encounter structural and institutional barriers. A key challenge lies in the persistence of participatory gaps, defined by limited communication, weak engagement, and a lack of inclusive decision-making. These gaps reduce community ownership and weaken the sustainability of initiatives (Bello & Kamanga, 2020; Dodds et al., 2018). Governance challenges such as weak transparency, poor accountability, and dependence on external actors further restrict local empowerment (Nagarjuna, 2015; Imbaya et al., 2019). Moreover, the constraint of finding collaborative partners with shared visions of tourism development adds to these challenges (Bertella & Romanelli, 2017).

Community engagement

Community engagement is widely recognised as a cornerstone of successful CBTIs. Meaningful participation empowers residents, fosters local ownership, and enhances equitable benefit distribution (Setokoe et al., 2019). It further strengthens support for tourism projects by aligning them with the needs and aspirations of the community. Woyo & Musavengane (2023) reveal that CBTIs can reduce poverty and improve livelihoods in rural African communities. Pardosi (2024) argues that the outcomes differ depending on how effectively benefits are delivered and communities are engaged. Mokabe et al. (2024) and Aref (2011) highlight that participation is most effective when accompanied by transparent stakeholder communication, as this promotes stronger governance structures and more inclusive decision-making processes. Echoing this sentiment, Ndlovu et al. (2018) argue that active community involvement must remain central to CBTIs if they are to achieve collaboration, coordination and long-term sustainability. Moreover, international scholarship further corroborates the importance of participation, hence, Tosun (2006) identifies community engagement as a prerequisite for sustainable tourism, while Murphy (2014) conceptualises it as a planning instrument for social and economic improvement. Pretty's (1995) typologies establish a clear correlation between deeper engagement such as empowerment and self-mobilisation and more durable benefits. Conversely, superficial participation, exemplified by token consultation, can perpetuate dependency and constrain local agency. This consensus is nevertheless challenged by Jørgensen & Thøning (2017) who posit that even robust community involvement may not preclude challenges like inequitable benefit sharing and internal conflict. Similarly, Imbaya et al. (2019) argue that participation can exacerbate tensions in contexts of weak governance and external dependency. These critiques underline that outcomes are not assured but are contingent upon institutional, social, and cultural conditions. Within the South African context, the Framework for Community Participation in Tourism (FCPT) offers a structured approach for integrating communities into the tourism value chain (NDT, 2021). Acknowledging distinct community strengths and limitations, the framework advocates for tailored engagement strategies. This point is also alluded to by Sifolo & Henama (2023), that for proper tourism planning and development at the international, national, provincial, or local levels, community engagement is key as a practical entry point for community ownership, service provision, and partnerships. This model prioritises skills transfer, capacity building, and equitable benefit-sharing to transition engagement from rhetorical commitment to tangible transformation. Therefore, the literature positions community engagement as both critical and contested. Although its importance for empowerment and sustainability is widely accepted, significant challenges persist, particularly concerning power dynamics and governance. This finding necessitates a context-specific analysis. Thus, within the Mkhuhlu context characterised by persistent unemployment, poverty, and inequality it is imperative to examine resident perceptions of participation to critically assess the opportunities and limitations of community engagement.

Benefits community-based tourism

Afenyo-Agbe & Mensah (2022) observe that communities can benefit from supplying goods and services to tourism enterprises, thereby creating vital backward links in economies with limited alternative markets. This aligns with Butler's (2017) findings that CBTIs can generate diverse employment opportunities, contributing to household income stability. Furthermore, the sale of handicrafts and cultural performances provides supplementary livelihood strategies, helping to preserve cultural practices while offering economic returns (Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, 2019). Crucially, when compared to conventional, externally owned tourism models, CBTIs are theorised to ensure a greater retention of benefits within the host community through principles of local ownership and participatory involvement (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Beyond immediate financial gains, literature frequently frames CBTIs as a catalyst for capacity development and institutional strengthening. Participation is seen to facilitate skills acquisition in areas such as business management, hospitality, and communication, thereby enhancing residents' overall employability and human capital (Dodds et al., 2018). As a result, Chambwe et al. (2023) state that the process of capacitation is considered fundamental to sustainable development, as it builds local agency and reduces dependency on external actors.

However, a significant body of research cautions that these benefits are not automatic and are often circumscribed by structural challenges. Critics note that economic benefits are frequently unevenly distributed, captured by local elites, and may primarily yield low-skilled, seasonal employment that offers little long-term financial security (Manyara & Jones, 2007; Jørgensen & Thøning, 2017). Similarly, the goal of capacity building can be undermined by poorly managed initiatives that foster dependency rather than genuine empowerment (Imbaya et al., 2019). Consequently, the potential of CBTIs as transformative development is widely recognised. The actualisation of benefits appears profoundly contingent on contextual factors such as governance structures, power dynamics, and the equitable distribution of costs and rewards (Sithole et al., 2021). It is within this critical gap between the theoretical promise of CBTIs and their on-the-ground outcomes that this study is centered, seeking to assess how benefits and challenges materialise in the specific context of Mkhuhlu.

Challenges of CBTIs

CBTIs encounter persistent structural and institutional challenges. Bello & Kamanga (2020) highlight that limited access to information prevents communities from fully recognising opportunities and assessing trade-offs, thereby constraining effective participation. The imbalance of information tends to empower external actors over community members, a dynamic that contradicts the principle of reciprocity emphasised in Social Exchange Theory. Similarly, Moswete et al. (2012) argue that the absence of robust policy frameworks weakens implementation and hinders coordinated management of CBTIs. As Imbaya et al. (2019) note, rural tourism ventures often depend on external funding, which is sporadic and unsustainable. This reliance exacerbates community dependency and exposes projects to collapse once external resources are withdrawn. Moreover, disputes generate internal conflicts, unrealistic expectations, and inequitable benefit distribution (Jørgensen & Thøning 2017). Such tensions highlight the need to balance inclusivity with transparent management and realistic goal setting. A comparison of benefits and challenges reveals CBTIs present viable opportunities for economic empowerment, their success is not automatic but shaped by governance frameworks, financial capacity, and collective community engagement. In the absence of interventions to overcome these structural constraints the initiatives may unintentionally reinforce the very forms of exclusion and inequality they are designed to dismantle.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design, chosen for its ability to capture residents lived experiences and perceptions of CBTIs. Qualitative research requires a rigorous and principled approach to design, given its interpretive nature and contextual sensitivity (Creswell & Poth, 2016). The research was grounded in interpretive phenomenology, a methodology concerned with exploring how individuals make sense of socially constructed realities within specific cultural and historical contexts (Al-Ababneh, 2020:80). A non-probability sampling strategy was used to recruit residents who were either currently engaged in, or had previously participated in, CBTIs in Mkhuhlu. Data was collected through seven in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions (FGDs). The first focus group comprised eight participants (FGD1), and the second included six participants (FGD2). The interviews were designed to address the following objectives: (a) assessing the role of CBTIs in addressing poverty and unemployment and (c) understanding the benefits and challenges of tourism initiatives. The focus groups were conducted to advance the second objective, namely (b) evaluating the level of community participation, by creating a space for interaction and dialogue among residents. As Osborne & Grant-Smith (2021) observe, the combination of interviews and FGDs enables researchers to capture both individual perspectives and collective dynamics. Data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2017) six-phase thematic analysis. This process entailed familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The researcher manually coded the transcripts, highlighting meaningful data segments and assigning labels that reflected their content. This iterative process allowed for the identification of patterns across the interviews and FGDs, which were then synthesised into themes aligned with the study objectives. Ethical considerations were observed throughout the research process. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all respondents. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and data were handled in accordance with ethical standards for qualitative research.

Results and discussion

Table 1 below shows the thematic presentation of the findings, SET was adopted, as derived from the data analysis process. Accordingly, three key themes emanated from the interviews and focus group discussions.

Table 1: Thematic presentation of findings linked to SET

Theme	Participant Excerpt	Implication / Analysis
Economic Benefits of CBTIs	"In previous years tourism initiatives have created temporary employment within the local communities." Participant 2	Shows that CBTIs provide immediate, tangible benefits through job creation, reflecting SET's reciprocity principle where residents support tourism when benefits outweigh costs. Supported by Nkansah-Dwamena (2023).
	"Having been involved in tourism activities for 6 years, I can say that I have been blessed with employment… enabled me to support my daughter throughout her college years." Participant 4	Demonstrates the transformative household-level benefits of CBTI income. Aligns with SET's focus on long-term welfare gains and intergenerational support.
	"Neighbouring camps… initiate projects such as bush clearing and funding youth through scholarships." Participant 1	Highlights indirect community benefits and external stakeholder investment. Reflects SET's emphasis on mutual exchange and shared value creation (Ramukumba 2023).
Governance & Trust Deficits	"People are hesitant to collaborate because they feel their voices won't be heard, or worse, their interests won't be protected." Participant 2	Illustrates SET's cost–benefit logic: residents disengage when perceived rewards are outweighed by exclusion. Echoes Khan (2024) on mistrust in collaboration.
	"Without governance we cannot, projects cannot operate as aim." (FGPN 2) "Since we established ourselves in 2009, we only started to receive funding from government 3 years ago." (FGPN 4)	Highlights governance deficits, mistrust, and funding shortages as barriers to sustainable CBTIs (Chiwawa & Wissink, 2023; Kubanza et al., 2021; Martin et al., 2022;).
	"Some people feel left out of decision-making and… they don't want to participate in future projects." Participant 5	Exclusion undermines reciprocity and discourages engagement. Resonates with Ramukumba & Matyile (2024) on stakeholder community disconnects.
	"I have noted that sometimes local leaders will accept initiatives that don't align with the needs of residents." Participant 2	Demonstrates governance misalignment, eroding trust a core SET principle. Supports Kubanza et al. (2021) on how weak governance disillusions communities.
Participation & Inclusion	"Our biggest challenge? When we call for planning meetings, the turnout isn't what we hope for. Then, when initiative starts, conflicts arise." Participant 6	Illustrates the participation paradox: theoretical inclusion versus weak practical involvement. In SET terms, conflict increases perceived costs, reducing willingness to engage.
	"That project paused because community members wanted the people to be changed." Participant 7	Reveals fragility of social cohesion; perceptions of favouritism reduce legitimacy. Reflects SET's emphasis on fairness as a basis for reciprocity.
	"They are just suffering to be sustainable and lacking the funds." Participant 5	Shows that limited resources constrain genuine participation, confirming SET's principle that residents withdraw support when costs (lack of sustainability) outweigh benefits.

Implications

This research utilized SET as its theoretical lens to investigate the mechanisms through which CBTIs foster economic empowerment within the community of Mkhuhlu, Mpumalanga. The analysis reveals a dialectical tension between developmental potential and systemic limitation. Empirical data substantiate that CBTIs confer tangible socio-economic benefits; these include the generation of temporary employment, the stimulation of micro-enterprise development, the provision of supplementary household income through the sale of local goods and services, and the preservation of cultural heritage. Such outcomes are congruent with broader socio-economic development objectives, notably the advancement of Sustainable Development Goal 1 (No Poverty), while concurrently enhancing the resilience of the local economy. Conversely, the transformative capacity of these initiatives is critically circumscribed by pervasive structural impediments. Principal among these are significant governance deficits, manifesting as inadequate accountability mechanisms, insufficient transparency, and ineffective leadership. As a result, institutional weaknesses are compounded by chronic financial precarity. A systematic exclusion of community residents from key decision-making processes that includes limited collaboration amongst stakeholders. Collectively, these factors create an erosion of communal trust, attenuate senses of local ownership, and diminish long-term endorsement for tourism schemes.

The analysis reinforces the SET principle that economic empowerment is not an automatic outcome of tourism development but depends on how residents evaluate the balance of costs and benefits. Participation is more likely when perceived benefits such as income, empowerment, and cultural recognition outweigh costs, including time investment, resource use, or risks of exploitation. This balance is strongly mediated by trust, reciprocity, and institutional transparency, which SET identifies as essential to sustaining cooperative exchange relationships. When governance is opaque and financial flows unpredictable, residents perceive exchanges as unfair, which in turn reduces willingness to invest time, skills, and cultural assets in CBTIs. At a practical level, the findings imply that CBTIs in Mkhuhlu must transition towards community-centred operational models that institutionalise transparent governance and equitable benefit-sharing. Strengthening accountability mechanisms such as open decision-making processes and regular public reporting can address current perceptions of exclusion and favouritism. Furthermore, addressing seasonality requires diversification of tourism products and the development of year-round income-generating activities, ensuring that households are not left vulnerable to seasonal shocks. Training and capacity-building programmes must also be better aligned with local economic opportunities, equipping residents with both technical and entrepreneurial skills to maximise participation in tourism value chains.

These findings underscore the importance of robust institutional frameworks and stronger inter-stakeholder collaboration. At the municipal and provincial levels, CBTIs should be integrated into Local Economic Development (LED) strategies, with funding frameworks moving beyond once-off grants towards multi-year, performance-linked support. Clearer linkages are also needed between community initiatives and the private tourism sector, particularly in supply chain procurement and market access. Policy interventions should not only promote financial investment but also prioritise governance reforms that empower communities as decision-making partners rather than passive beneficiaries. In the context of Mkhuhlu, stronger partnerships between traditional leadership, municipal structures, and local tourism associations could help institutionalise equitable participation. The study also contributes to the refinement of SET in tourism contexts. It demonstrates that beyond individual perceptions of fairness, structural factors such as governance quality, tenure security, and seasonal market volatility act as moderators of exchange relationships. Trust was shown to mediate the link between benefits and participation, meaning that equivalent economic gains do not automatically yield higher engagement in contexts where trust is low. Moreover, seasonality introduces a temporal dimension to exchange, with residents valuing consistent, year-round benefits more than intermittent financial gains. The study extends the explanatory scope of SET by showing that, in rural tourism contexts,

exchange dynamics are embedded within multi-actor relationships and institutional structures that critically shape community responses.

Conclusion

The research establishes that that while Community-Based Tourism Initiatives (CBTIs) in Mkhuhlu hold significant potential for economic empowerment through job creation and entrepreneurship, their effectiveness is severely constrained by systemic barriers. The findings reveal that empowerment is not an automatic outcome of tourism development but is contingent on the dynamics of social exchange. Governance deficits, characterized by a lack of transparency and accountability, coupled with financial instability and exclusionary decision-making, erode the trust and reciprocity necessary for resident participation, ultimately undermining sustainability. Therefore, the pathway to transforming this potential into tangible outcomes requires a fundamental recalibration of approach. For CBTIs to become genuine engines of sustainable development, they must evolve beyond short-term projects into community-driven models. This necessitates embedding the principles of Social Exchange Theory which includes trust, equity, and reciprocity into practice through inclusive governance. Resulting on strengthened institutional frameworks, and strategic partnerships that ensure benefits are perceived to outweigh costs, fostering lasting community resilience.

Limitations

This study was limited to Mkhuhlu, Mpumalanga, with a small sample of participants, which restricts the generalisability of the findings. Data relied on self-reports, which may be subject to personal bias, and time and resource constraints prevented longitudinal or observational methods. While Social Exchange Theory guided the analysis, other theoretical perspectives might yield additional insights. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable understanding of Community-Based Tourism Initiatives in rural South African contexts.

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