



Community-based tourism development in Victoria Falls, Kompisi Cultural Village: an entrepreneur's model

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Abstract

The development of Community Based Tourism has encountered numerous challenges in the last decade in a global context and also in Zimbabwe. The decline of mainstream tourism and the withdrawal of donor funding at the height of Zimbabwe's socio-political crisis at the turn of the millennium, spelt doom for most community-based tourism projects which were donor-funded. However, as the tourism sector begins to recover, it is critical to take a serious look at issues contributing to the success of community-based tourism projects such as Ko Mpise in Victoria Falls and how such a model based on community entrepreneurship can be replicated elsewhere. The study identifies the importance of marketing linkages by community-based entrepreneurs, as they ensure that there is guaranteed business to the community-based tourism project. However, a compelling weakness is that tour operators are not keen to reduce this relationship into a binding contractual agreement, which could lead to more transparency in the business relationship. In addition, this could help widen the revenue base for the community-based entrepreneur. It is also telling to note that the level of business management practices by community entrepreneurs is still very low based on practical feedback from the study and this is an area requiring capacity building by authorities and mindset shift on the part of the entrepreneur. Ultimately, where community-based tourism projects weathered the test of time they need to be nurtured into sustainability if they are to then gravitate into bigger scale companies. The critical role of Governments in enacting appropriate policy frameworks for community-based tourism projects to thrive is also a key finding of this study. The study also concluded that the private sector needs to develop linkages with community-based tourism projects to guarantee them of business and revenue inflows.

Keywords: Community-Based Tourism Projects, Entrepreneur, Market Linkages, Victoria Falls, Policy

Introduction

Community-based tourism is reflected upon in this study as a critical aspect in ensuring that benefits from mainstream tourism also reach a host community. Ko Mpise Cultural Village which formed the core focus of this study is a community-based tourism project located in Monde Village, about 15 km from the Victoria Falls Resort, which is the hub of tourism in Zimbabwe.

The location of the community-based tourism project within a community homestead gives it an authentic feel that resonates well with tourists seeking to experience the warmth of the Zimbabwean people and its unique culture. Administratively, Monde Village falls under Hwange Rural District, where tourism has potential to offer significant livelihoods option to the community. This is due to the high volume of tourism traffic attracted by the abundance of wildlife resources in Hwange National Park and the international appeal of the mighty Victoria Falls. Nhemachena *et al.*, (2014), argues that Hwange is a semiarid region hence the livelihoods of most people in this district are co-dependent on agriculture and the tourism industry. This article acknowledges the potential of tourism to impact on the livelihoods of



host communities. It further explores issues to do with community-based entrepreneurship, in a bid to investigate more areas to widen livelihood benefits for communities living near tourism resorts.

The Zimbabwean Government has taken a keen interest to develop community based tourism projects, believing firmly that they can be a useful tool in alleviating poverty of the rural and marginalised communities (National Tourism Policy, 2014). Whilst Government has helped a number of community based projects (CBT's) to be established, there has been little effort to ensure that such projects evolve to become sustainable enterprises that can be weaned easily from over-reliance on donor and government funding. The authorities have also not taken a keen interest to determine what could be critical success factors for CBT's to thrive, so that these can be promoted as models that can be successfully replicated elsewhere. Whilst Ko Mpise Cultural Village has thrived in Victoria Falls, the same cannot be said of other CBT's like Kune Ngoma Cultural Village, located within the same village. Resultantly, the need to promote entrepreneurship among CBT's is telling on the contrasting fortunes of these two community based-tourism projects. In spite of growth in arrivals and revenue, tourism has not transformed African economies enough (Adu-Febiri, 1990). The CBT's represent an area where more benefits for the host community can be widened.

Literature Review

Community based tourism is increasingly being promoted as a means of reducing poverty and fostering local community development (Means *et al.*, 2014). The central role of tourism in poverty alleviation has grown over the years and this has attracted a lot of scholars to extensively write on the issues of community based tourism. Several definitions emerge on what really is community based tourism (CBT). However, most definitions in reviewed literature achieve convergence in that they all identify community benefits as a central factor in a CBT. One definition by Dixey (2005), regards a CBT as tourist assets that are owned and or managed by communities, with the expectation of generating wider benefits to the community. In defining a CBT, Hauster and Strasdas (2003) emphasise the participation of locals in tourism and in the distribution of benefits to the local community.

This view is collaborated by Brohman (1996), who defines a CBT as one that seeks to strengthen institutions designed to enhance the local participation of the popular majority in tourism. Sheyvens (2002), believes a CBT ultimately aims to empower a community socially, economically, psychologically and politically. On the other hand, Denman (2001), believes that a CBT should not only foster sustainable use and collective responsibility but also embrace individual initiatives within a community. This view by Denman (2001), on individual initiatives seems to characterise the development of Kompise Cultural Village. In as much as it is regarded as a CBT, especially by virtue of operating within a community, it by and large represents the aspirations of a community entrepreneur who has managed to eke out a living from tourism.

The operations of such a community entrepreneur are premised on the Community Enterprise Model, which Chiutsi and Mudzengi (2012), assert as an integrated approach to tourism resource ownership and accrual of benefits to community. On the other hand, Nyaruwata (2011), believes that CBT models in Zimbabwe are not uniform and represent a continuum ranging from one where communities are involved in the day-to-day running of the CBT, to a passive model, where communities are not decision-makers, but only receive set dividends. In the case of Mr Ndlovu, the owner of Ko Mpise Cultural Village, he is the central figure in the venture and community benefits take unique form with villagers being afforded an opportunity to participate in business activities as partners and other infrastructural benefits accruing to them.



Interesting views have also emerged from reviewed literature on why CBT's seem to be less successful in developing countries. Some of the reasons identified by Holden (2011), include marginalisation in decision-making and lack of education and financing, which all militate the involvement of the poor in tourism. In their view, Lopez-Guzman *et al* (2011), for community based projects to thrive, there must be contractual arrangements between the local community and tourism companies. This is consistent with the view of Chiutsi and Mudzengi (2012), who highlight the need to build linkages between the local community and the tourism market as critical to the success of CBT's.

However, Echterner (1995), bemoans the lack of entrepreneurship emphasis in Africa's education system, arguing that the current education system in most African countries focus to teach skills for employment in given positions instead of preparing them to be entrepreneurs. A study by Sebelo (2010), in Botswana also cites poor marketing, lack of entrepreneurship skills and dependency on donor funding as key challenges for CBT's. Reviewed literature also underlines the central role that Governments should play in the successful development of CBT's. Simpson (2008), argues that historically most governments have taken a back seat in development of tourism and if CBT's are to thrive, governments must provide a collaborative role in tourism planning.

In Zambia, Dixey (2005), regretted the fact that the licensing structure does not recognise community-based tourism projects as tourism facilities and this is a potential threat to the safety of tourists. In a study of CBT's in Swaziland, Mearns *et al.*, (2014), highlights the importance of the private sector, particularly tour operators, who must include CBT's in their packages if they are to succeed. In doing so, Font (2008), believes that this can guarantee market access and generate visitorship to community enterprises. In expanding this role, Dixey (2005), argues that tourists are normally on tight travelling schedules, which are pre-planned, hence the involvement of tour operators in planning community tours in the whole itinerary becomes essential. In Zimbabwe, this becomes more important given the fact that about 53% of holiday or leisure visitors surveyed during the 2015/6 Visitor Exit Survey were on packaged tours. It will therefore be difficult for Community-based tourism projects to survive in resorts such as Victoria Falls without the collaborative support from tour operators. Reviewed literature such as Ashley *et al* (2000), identifies community benefits from tourism as drawn from wages in formal employment, sale of goods to tourism businesses and dividends or profits from locally owned enterprises. CBT's where communities have a greater say represent more benefits to the local communities.

Methodology

The researcher employed a qualitative research design and data was collected using participant observation and in-depth interviews. The choice of participant observation was inclined by Bernard (1994), who argued that it helps establish rapport between researcher and community and the former blends well so as to effectively collect data. However, Kawulich (2005), argues that the validity of participant observation is stronger when employed together with strategies such as in-depth interviews and documentary analysis. The in-depth interviews were used to further explore observations with the entrepreneur and a team of experts (10), drawn from Government and tourism operators who were considered knowledgeable enough in the area under study. This is all part of purposive sampling as the respondents who took part in the in-depth interviews were chosen based on their perceived knowledge, which the researcher concluded could better serve the research objectives.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The following thematic issues emerged during the study.



Policy and Legal Framework

In Zimbabwe, consistent with reviewed literature there is no licensing framework for community-based tourism projects. Any licensing regime in the tourism sector would help prescribe minimum operating standards for tourism facilities. Unfortunately, in the absence of such a framework, it is also very difficult to guarantee high operating standards by CBT's.

Business Concept

Ko Mpise Cultural Village offers a tourist experiential product where tourists can immerse in the day to day lives of a villager in rural Zimbabwe. Apart from dancing and culinary experiences, the tourists can also partake in curio making and interact with a resident painter who is disabled and has been offered a place to showcase her skills at the village. In terms of modelling community based projects, what will make them successful is to ensure that they offer varied experiences and that each has a unique selling from the other. This will enable tour operators to create a community trail with varied cultural experiences. In Victoria Falls, just close to Ko Mpisi is another budding community-based project, Kune Ngoma Cultural village, which adopted an almost similar experience as the former, but has not, been very successful. It has failed to excite the market and issues of differentiation of CBT experiences within the same destination will be key to CBT development in tourism resorts. Entrepreneurs should not replicate cultural villages without offering unique experiences that appeal differently to tourists.

Business Management and Strategic Planning

The study also sought to ascertain whether community based entrepreneurs undertake business planning to shape the future directions of their ventures. The entrepreneur articulated well his future vision but there is no written documentation to that effect. In the absence of such a plan, it will be difficult to measure performance. Interestingly, there is no record available on the performance of the CBT since 1996. It was also not easy for the entrepreneur to disclose the CBT's earnings from tourism only highlighting that it had substantially improved their lives as a family and also impacted on the larger community.

Business Financing

The start up financing for the CBT was raised from the personal savings of Mr Ndlovhu. However, the CBT has also received support from Government in several ways. During the 20th session General Assembly of the United Nations World Tourism Organisation held in Victoria Falls in August 2013, the CBT was chosen as one of the technical tours. A number of tourists visited the CBT through organised tours that generated revenue and media exposure for the cultural village. The CBT also received corporate sponsorship sourced by the Ministry of Tourism and Hospitality Industry, to drill a borehole at the cultural village, prior to this event. Resultantly, a lot of future business linkages with tour operators was also generated. It appears, the Ministry and its parastatal, the Zimbabwe Tourism Authority, have unofficially chosen the Ko Mpise Cultural Village as their model CBT and this has helped generate demand as groups are taken to the Village whenever there are major conferences held in Victoria Falls.

The UNWTO functions have also helped generate a web presence for the CBT as some of the clips of performances are listed on YouTube.com. This financing arrangement where the entrepreneur has also committed finances into the project is helpful, as it solicits their buy-in into the project compared to donor funded schemes. It can also be replicated in community project where instead of expecting the community to receive donor or government funding in full for project start up, they should also contribute one way or the other.



Marketing Linkages

The success of Ko Mpise Cultural Village can also be attributed to the cordial working relations they have with tour operators who are bringing in clients to the Cultural Village. Consistent with reviewed literature, this has also helped shore up visitorship to the community based tourism projects. Whilst this is the case, it is apparent that there is no contractual arrangement between Ko Mpise and the tour operators', to govern this relationship going forward. Formal contractual arrangements could help increase transparent and ensure that the Ko Mpise benefits for every visitor received are clearly pre-defined and are negotiated for. Given the reluctance of the operator to shed more light on this, it would however, appear much of the financial benefits come from off the pocket expenditure by tourists. Reviewed literature such as Cooper (2004), believe that if the running of a CBT is transparent this will help reduce conflicts. A few tour operators are actually marketing Ko Mpise Cultural Village on their brochures. However, a further development that would have helped is to ensure Ko Mpise Cultural Village also has a website which can be co-hosted or linked to the tour operator sites. Reviewed literature such as Hitchins and Highstead (2005), identify marketing linkages as a critical success factor for CBT'S, arguing very few can survive in the long-term as independent businesses, if they are isolated from the private sector.

Community Benefits

Given the interesting model of this CBT whereby, it represents an entrepreneur within a community, it was interesting to see how the community at large benefits from its existence. The establishment and growth of the CBT has brought tangible benefits to the community. The drilling of a borehole at Ko Mpise Homestead has provided access to fresh and clean water to the surrounding community of more than 10 families. Prior to this, they were walking more than 3km to fetch water. The benefit has also been extended to their domesticated animals such as goats and cattle. This is consistent with reviewed literature such as Manyara and Jones (2007), who believes that community-based tourism initiatives can stimulate further development in a community. In incidences where the Cultural Village hosts many tourists, neighbouring families supply food items and also benefit by providing entertainment groups where remuneration is normally pooled together by cheerful tourists as tokens of appreciation. The villagers have also been able to display and sell their cultural wares at Ko Mpise Cultural Village. This has helped them earn extra income at less cost than they would when renting council-operated stalls in Victoria Falls resort town.

Quality of Infrastructure

Ko Mpise Cultural Village has made efforts to keep the experiential visit to the cultural tourism product as authentic as possible. However, the quality of buildings built with pole and daga is not up to standard. Most respondents in the mainstream accommodation sector indicated that it may be difficult for the cultural village to attract home-stay clients to the facility especially conventional tourists. However, this rustic nature may appeal to a niche market that is adventurous and not very quality conscious.

Recommendations

A number of recommendations emerge from this study, informed by observations during the visit and expert opinions expressed by those that took part in the in-depth interviews. It is recommended that the Government should include CBT's in their licensing framework and ensure licensing officers also monitor the observance of minimum operating standards by CBT's. At independence in 1980, Zimbabwe adopted the Western Grading style system, based on star ratings and that has no room for licensing CBT's. There is need to have a tailor-made licensing framework for CBT's, whilst being cognisant that CBT's may not be



readily licensed for revenue, but to guarantee minimum operating standards. Such licensing gives them legitimacy in line with the registration requirements of the Tourism Act, Chapter 14:20 of 1996, which requires every facility used by tourists to be registered. In the absence of such a framework, an operational guideline or manual will be useful. The Government of Zimbabwe should also make concerted effort to set up a CBT Start-up Fund.

However, where possible, communities setting up CBT's will need to be encouraged to raise funds and additionally invest their own resources, as this raises involvement and commitment in the sustainability of the project. Private operators also have a critical role to play by helping CBT's to thrive and where village or community tours are undertaken to CBT's, a defined commission scheme to reward CBT's based on signed contracts is recommended. Training and capacity building in modern management practices also remains critical for CBT's to thrive. Governments will also do well to assist CBT's in product development so that they are sustainable, unique and appealing to tourists. A cluster of unique CBT's with different concepts can help create village trails within a destination.

Conclusion

It is compelling to note that Ko Mpise Cultural Village has built a unique selling point that resonates well with the demands of tourists visiting Zimbabwe from across the globe who are especially wanting to experience its culture in a natural setting. Ko Mpise Cultural Village is thriving in an environment where most CBT's are folding, having failed to exist beyond donor funding. Its success has hinged on marketing linkages with tour operators in Victoria Falls, who have brought in more business enjoyed by the CBT and raised its profile. However, there is room to improve the operations of the CBT by incorporating more sustainable ways of operation especially in finance management. In addition, the operator's relationship with tour operators need to be more formal, ideally reduced into contracts with defined commissions for business supplied.

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