

Addressing the operational challenges of community-based tourism in Swaziland

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Abstract

Community-based tourism is increasingly being developed and promoted as a means of reducing poverty in developing countries whereby the needs of local communities are met through the offering of a tourism product. The Swaziland Tourism Authority with the support of the European Union Fund has made significant contributions to the development of community-based tourism in Swaziland enabling rural communities to successfully develop tourist attractions. However, whilst many community-based tourism ventures have been established in developing countries, their operations have not been monitored properly by their respective governments, the private sector and donor organisations. The same scenario exists in Swaziland where, at the operational level, the projects are completely left in the hands of the communities, these projects seem to lack the drive and stagnate. It is apparent that most of these community-based tourism ventures are faced with a number of challenges at operational level. This study investigated the operational challenges facing community-based tourism in Swaziland and presents a number of recommendations.

Keywords: community-based tourism, community participation, operational challenges, Swaziland.



Figure 1: Mahamba Gorge Lodge (Authors, 2013).

Introduction

The tourism industry is a very dynamic and challenging one, where change is the rule (Bennett, 2000: 4). The tourism industry has seen the emergence of various new forms of tourism, of which community-based tourism (CBT) is one. It has been acknowledged that people in rural areas of developing countries pursue multiple strategies to make a living with some discovering tourism as a potential source of income complementing other activities (Forstner, 2004). Murphy (1985) states that the growth of tourism has converted many communities into destination areas, either as major resorts or as temporary stopovers for travellers, such as Shewula Mountain Camp and Mahamba Gorge Lodge in Swaziland. Tourism is important not only at a local level, but also at national and international levels (Aref, 2011). It has become a source of income generation for many communities seeking ways to improve their livelihoods. Tourism is often seen as a tool for poverty alleviation and community development (Giampiccoli & Hayward Kalis, 2012). For a number of developing countries, their natural and cultural heritage are a source of significant economic benefits, attracting international and domestic visitors often in search of an authentic natural and to a lesser extent, cultural experience (The Mountain Institute, 2000: 2). (According to Steiner & Reisinger (2006) authenticity relates to an individuals' personal tourist experience that heightens one's sense of identity and connectedness with the world). Community-based tourism is generally considered to have appeared during the 1970's as a reaction to the negative consequences of international mass tourism (Hall & Lew, 2009). López-Guzmán *et al.* (2011: 73) concur when they state that CBT has emerged as a possible solution to the negative effects of mass tourism in developing countries, allowing it to become a strategy for community organisation at the same time making it possible to attain better living conditions. CBT can be seen as a development option which can serve as a catalyst in the facilitation of community

development (Giampiccoli & Hayward, 2012). These relatively recent development options are based on a participatory approach and ultimately emerged as a result of top-down approaches to both conservation and development, which had been widely practiced by both conservation and development organisations (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009: 9). It is evident at a local level that opportunities for the development of new projects and activities are being developed, such as the exploitation of natural and cultural resources inherent to the local community for tourism purposes (López-Guzmán *et al.* 2011). The involvement of communities in tourism is undoubtedly important and growing. Amidst the social changes brought about by globalisation, local communities cannot live in isolation they are a part of tourism (REST, 2010: 10).

The community approach to tourism has been heralded as a way of empowering communities and affording them opportunities to break free from the destructive influences of mass tourism (Timothy, 2002). CBT supports development, and promotes community control of tourism. Key to CBT, but sometimes overlooked is the desire to achieve poverty alleviation and other development aims, CBT requires communities that are willing and able to implement and sustain tourism (Ellis & Sheridan, 2014). CBT is a more sustainable form of development than conventional mass tourism as it allows host communities to break away from the hegemonic grasp of tour operators and the oligopoly of wealthy elites at national level (Timothy, 2002). CBT is about grassroots empowerment as it seeks to develop the industry in harmony with the needs and aspirations of host communities in a way that is acceptable to them and which sustains their economies (Fitton, 1996).

Related to the increased sense of environmental and social responsibility in tourism, CBT is also gaining popularity as part of strategies for conservation and development (The Mountain Institute, 2000). Niche markets and tourism trends

such as eco-tourism, avitourism, heritage tourism, sustainable tourism, community-based tourism and pro-poor tourism approaches, have been developed in response to the need to reduce negative impacts on the environment and to try to extract from the industry for the marginal sectors of society (Cooper, 2004). As an alternative to mainstream tourism, CBT ventures have such appeal that they are rarely subjected to critical review. There are very few studies on the actual contribution of CBT to either conservation or community livelihood. However, despite very little demonstrable benefit, the ideas remain attractive, largely because little effort has been made to record, measure or report the benefits accruing to conservation or local communities (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009: 10).

While using tourism to promote community development sounds like a wonderful concept in principle, in practice it is fraught with challenges (Scheyvens, 2002). One of the challenges relates to the heterogeneous nature of the communities. Often communities are split into various factions based on a complex interplay of class, gender and ethnic factors, and certain families or individuals are likely to lay claim to privileges because of their apparent status. In such circumstances, it is unlikely that community members will have equitable access to involvement in tourism development and the benefits this may bring.

Scheyvens (2002) further identifies another challenge with identifying tourism as a strategy for community development in that communities typically lack information, resources and power in relation to other stakeholders in the tourism process, thus they are vulnerable to exploitation. When finance is not available locally, there is generally a loss of control to outside interests (Scheyvens, 2002). Contrary to the goals of CBT which are commendable and worthwhile to pursue, Timothy (2002) states that barriers to the implementation of CBT can relate to socio-political traditions, gender and ethnicity, accessibility of information, lack of awareness, economic issues, and

lack of cooperation/partnerships among others. As Cooper (2004: 1), states "experience shows that tourism's contribution to community and rural development and local industry has not been fully realised". Ndlovu and Rogerson (2004) highlight that it is apparent that a number of factors may potentially affect on the success of any CBT venture in the developing world.

It should, however, be remembered that, when the main driving force behind the involvement of communities into community-based tourism is business, it often alienates rather than benefits the local community (Mearns, 2003) as communities receive little benefits through tourism. This is especially in the short-term as few community based tourism ventures deliver significant financial benefits, and the benefits that do accumulate to the community take a significant time period to materialise. Therefore, CBT should not be seen as an end in itself, but as a means towards empowering poor communities to take control over their land and resources, to tap their potential and to acquire the skills necessary for their own development (Mearns, 2003). Some concerns about the viability of the CBT enterprises have been raised within the international donor and research community asking whether the significant amount of grant money provided by the donors and non-government organisations (NGOs) to these CBT enterprises was justifiable based on CBT true benefits to the community and the environment (Goodwin & Santilli 2009). Mitchell and Reid (2001) state that communities, particularly rural ones, are often on the front line in service provision but last to receive benefits from their efforts.

While scholars, entrepreneurs and practitioners are beginning to understand the need for placing greater emphasis on community empowerment in tourism planning and implementation, little work has been done on the details of development and the execution of CBT (Mitchell & Reid, 2001). Whilst many CBT projects have been funded in developing

countries, such as Swaziland, their success has not been widely monitored. The actual benefits to local communities remain largely unquantified (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). While CBT goals are commendable and worthwhile to pursue, and their contributions to sustainable development are obvious, many barriers to their operationalisation exist. This is particularly the case in the less developed world (Timothy, 2002). Results in Botswana show that, although some benefits have been identified, there remain many challenges. Among these challenges at the Khama Rhino Sanctuary Trust are poor management, marketing and entrepreneurial skills; lack of community involvement and participation and the heavy reliance on foreign donors (Sebele, 2010). In Namibia, out of eight community-private sector joint ventures initiated between 1996 and 1998, only two reached operational stage with the remaining six, either not proceeding, investor withdrawal or negotiations halted (Ashley & Jones, 2001). Rural communities in Lesotho have very little knowledge and ability to fully engage in tourism projects. Two organisations, The Ministry of Tourism and Culture and Lesotho Tourism Development Corporation took the initiative to establish community-based tourism at Ha-Kome area, however communities are benefiting very little (Maanela, 2008). CBT has demonstrated the potential to generate significant returns on its conservation, socio-economic and business objectives as ventures have spread and evolved. However, major challenges have emerged relating mainly to the governance of these enterprises (Nelson 2008). Evidence indicates that most CBT projects have not contributed to local poverty reduction or delivered sufficient incentives for conservation (Goodwin, 2006 cited in Dixey, 2008: 324).. More recent publications have raised major concerns about the ineffectiveness, potential unsustainability or failure of CBT enterprises and the lack of accountability with regard to responsibility and performance (Dixey, 2008: 324). Whilst some CBT tourism schemes have been widely adopted, many under the guise of

ecotourism, their success or otherwise are something which has not been greatly researched (Goodwin & Santilli 2009: 9).

In recent years, academic studies of tourism and development have been enriched by a much more specific focus on the benefits that tourism might bring to the poor (Hall, 2007). While it is true that some rural communities struggle to plan, initiate, and sustain CBT projects, it is nevertheless possible, with the right combination of circumstances that successful CBT can be achieved (Kontogeorgopoulos *et al.*, 2014). In Swaziland, some CBT projects have been successfully initiated but are faced with various challenges at operational level - some struggling to sustain income levels while others are forced to cease operations altogether. In an attempt to understand and resolve these challenges, this study investigated the operational challenges of selected CBT ventures in Swaziland.

Study area

Swaziland is a country in the southern region of Africa bordered by the Republic of South Africa on the north, west and south, and Mozambique on the east. It is a small, landlocked kingdom of about 1.1 million people (World Bank, 2011) and, has a considerable geographic and climatic diversity (Harrison, 1995). Swaziland has many nature reserves that protect a vast variety of flora, fauna and birds. Nature reserves include Phophonyane Nature Reserve near Piggs Peak, Malolotja Nature Reserve (which is the largest in the country), Mlilwane Wildlife Sanctuary (the oldest nature reserve in the country) and Mantenga Nature Reserve, which are all in the Hhohho region. In the Lubombo region, there are Hlane Royal National Park, Mkhaya Game Reserve, Mbuluzi and Mlawula Nature Reserves and Nisela Safaris. The kingdom offers accommodation as diverse as the country's spectacular scenery.

Tourism in Swaziland

The Swaziland government has shown the importance of tourism through the establishment of the Swaziland Tourism Authority (STA) which aims at stimulating and expanding the tourism industry through various programmes. The STA is a parastatal organisation that began operating in 2001. It was formed with the objective of stimulating and expanding the industry through various programmes and was officially launched by His Majesty King Mswati III in September 2003. This launch demonstrates the monarch's support of the STA programmes.

The country was also ranked third in sub-Saharan Africa in terms of tourism performances for the 2009/2010 review period, after South Africa and Kenya (Swaziland Review, 2011). According to Forsyth-Thompson (2011) Swaziland has tended to be a single overnight stay destination in the past but during recent years stays have increased to two or three nights. The country has also started to reap the benefits from the vigorous marketing drives by the STA and the private sector (Central Bank of Swaziland 2010).

Community-based tourism in Swaziland

The Kingdom of Swaziland, under the auspices of the Swaziland Tourism

Authority, has established tourism developments in order to promote biodiversity conservation and natural resource use such as gorges and rocks with Mahamba Gorge Lodge and Sibebe Rock Hiking Trails as examples where local communities may benefit. This has stimulated local communities to establish tourism development projects in various areas to benefit the communities and also promote conservation.

The developing sector of community-based tourism also enables visitors to acquire first-hand experience of the Swazi way of life. The STA has made significant contributions to the development of community-based tourism, enabling rural communities to develop tourist attractions on national land.

This is undertaken in a manner that avoids any negative environmental impact (Forsyth-Thomson, 2011). Many national aid agencies have also devoted resources to community-based tourism (Hall, 2007). There are a total of eight projects under this scheme, namely Shewula Mountain Camp, Ngwempisi Hiking Trails, Khelekhele Horse Trails, Mahamba Gorge Lodge, Maguga Dam Panorama, Nsangwini Rock Art, Sibebe Rock Hiking Trails and Lonhlupheko Craft Market (Forsyth-Thompson, 2011). Figure 2 shows the location of the eight mentioned CBT ventures.



Figure 2: CBT map of Swaziland (Forsyth-Thompson, 2012) -The Kingdom of Swaziland Tourism Community Projects

Methodology

This study used the mixed methods research design whereby data was collected through in-depth interviews, focus group interviews and participant observation for the qualitative research, and visitor questionnaires for the quantitative research. As the purposive sampling method was used

in the study, the researchers identified individuals who were involved with CBT in Swaziland. In this study, the researchers purposefully selected four tourism experts for interviews. These were STA's product development officer; and marketing manager, Myxo's Woza Nawe Cultural Tours

director and All Out Africa's director. Four CBT ventures were used as case studies and these were Shewula Mountain Camp, Ngwempisi Hiking Trails, Khelekhele Horse Trails and Mahamba Gorge Lodge. In each of these CBT ventures, focus group interviews comprising of between seven to ten participants were arranged, two hundred questionnaires filled in by tourists visiting the 4 CBT ventures were also collected and personal observations were all employed as data collection tools. This paper presents a number of recommendations that form part of a larger academic postgraduate study that investigated the operational challenges of CBT ventures in Swaziland.

These recommendations are based on the findings of the study as well as the suggestions made by the respondents that participated in the study.

Findings

In the wake of the investigated and identified operational challenges, the following are recommendations for possible solutions. Some of these solutions are based on what the respondents highlighted.

Improved community participation: Some community members were not aware of the CBT ventures thinking they were someone else's property for example the Methodist Church in the case of the Mahamba Gorge Lodge. The researchers established that some community practices destroy the road signs. This clearly demonstrates how the projects operated without full community participation (CP). Murphy (1985) states that studies on the outcomes of tourism have confirmed the importance of involving local communities at various stages of

tourism development from planning through implementation to its evaluation. Involving the community is a critically important and complex subject for successful CBT (Denman, 2001). CP functions as a driving force to protect the community's natural environment and culture as tourism products, while simultaneously encouraging greater tourism-related income (Okazaki, 2008). There is no doubt that CP is key, as Cooper (2004) states that initiatives that employed a broad, inclusive process of decision-making and visioning at the onset of the activity showed greatest success in achieving their objectives. A transparent process also helps to manage conflicts (Cooper, 2004). CP is widely supported and advocated within tourism in the developing world.

The board of trustees and management of the CBT ventures to work more transparently and be accountable to the community to avoid the negative attitude from the communities. The community needs to be mobilised and be made aware of the importance of the ventures for their benefit. Frequent meetings need to be held for the communities to be involved in decision making and also to have an understanding of the operations of these projects. This will empower the communities, increase the desire to share responsibility and improve project efficiency. Participation should not only be limited to the communities, but government as well. Government needs to continue facilitating the operations of CBT ventures as this will aid the productivity of CBT without compromising the benefits to the communities.

Board of trustees and staff training: The study established that donor funding came with strict timeframes that were unrealistic and the approach

of trying to get a business started by a large community is a flawed concept. A lot of training and capacity building that is needed has not happened. Getting qualified people within communities to operate these CBT ventures, not only as members of the board of trustees but also to join the management of these ventures is a challenge. Some employees have been offered training through the STA, but they did not stay in the employ of the CBT ventures for long, as these projects did not offer competitive salaries.

The trained staff use CBT ventures as a stepping stone to move to other tourism ventures, and this significantly affects the operation of the CBT ventures. In some ventures, the board of trustees did not fully understand their role and responsibilities because they were not given any form of training. Tourism education and training is one of the fundamental pillars of the development of a new responsible tourism venture. Government should continuously empower the locals with training and not make it a once-off exercise.

Marketing: Of the four CBT ventures, only Shewula Mountain Camp manages to market its product independently. At the time of writing, the Mahamba Gorge Lodge, Khelekhele Horse Trails and Ngwempisi Hiking Trails still rely on the STA for their marketing. The communities were given these ventures without any operational resources to kick-start their businesses. Without financial backup, it is a challenge to promote their product. Through the assistance from the STA, the Shewula Mountain Camp was expanded by building a conference centre. However, the conference centre did not function to

desired expectations. The conference centre, which has not been generating much income, needs more marketing. It should be promoted to the nearby business companies, government and non-governmental organisations. There is a need for a more targeted marketing campaign amongst the inhabitants of Swaziland.

Tighter security: Another challenge is security. An example of a security challenge came about as a result of the design of Khopho Hut Ngwempisi Hiking Trails which did not include doors and there are no full-time workers on the site. It has been reported that members of the community have stolen material such as mattresses and chairs belonging to the venture. At Khelekhele Horse Trails, guests have laid numerous complaints about the lack of fencing, feeling their cars would not be safe, more especially those who would like to spend the night. In Mahamba Gorge Lodge, staff have also been the victims of crime. There is no organised transportation for staff to go and deposit money in the bank. Safety and security has been identified as one of the five global forces that enhance the tourism industry.

The topic of safety and security in the tourism industry has gained vital importance, mainly after the 9/11 incident, thereafter both academics and practitioners have started looking into crisis management issues seeking workable solutions to mitigate these negative impacts (Chauhan, 2007).

Venture rejuvenation: With the current situation for some ventures such as Khelekhele Horse Trails, no one is taking the responsibility to commit to rejuvenating this venture. The community is looking upon government to take action and

government expects the community to own up and take responsibility. This then leaves the future of such ventures in limbo. The quality of the material used in some of the current structures is not good. The deteriorating structures need to be renovated with building material of good quality. It is a challenge to get some of these projects viable without some form of investment. A lot of investment is needed to revive some CBT ventures - investment not only in marketing, but also in the facilities in the form of renovation. There is also a need for infrastructure development.

Improved road conditions: The board members and staff at the Shewula Mountain Camp highlighted that they were having difficulty in maintaining the dirt road in a good condition from the main tarred road. They mentioned that during the rainy season, small cars sometimes had to be pulled out of the mud by tractor. Apart from rain, community practices such as oxen-drawn carts also worsen the road condition. During the ploughing season, tractors turn on the road when ploughing in the fields next to the road, also damaging the roads. The roads are best suited to 4x4 vehicles, which many local people do not own. The road is not in a good condition for small cars. Sometimes clients go back without making a booking because the CBT venture could not be accessed. Even though the road conditions were not a stumbling block, the staff and board of trustees believed government should assist to maintaining the roads in a good condition.

CBT Policy formulation: During the interviews, it became clear that Swaziland introduced CBT without any readily prepared policy from government. There was no clear policy

from government in terms of the direction in which CBT had to be driven. There was so much pressure from the funders to get the money used without the groundwork being properly prepared. Starting CBT without a clear policy in place contributes negatively to the development of CBT ventures. Government needs to work towards identifying appropriate and effective policies that would enhance operations of CBT. In developed and developing countries throughout the world, the majority of governments, through their agencies, have historically taken a back seat in tourism development, seemingly happy to allow the private sector to drive forward the industry in their countries and regions (Simpson, 2008). However, governments are now motivated to play an integral and collaborative role in tourism planning and management, and the private sector requires government assistance to ensure the sustainability of tourism (Simpson, 2008). To maximise the benefits and minimise the disadvantages of tourism to transform resources and host communities, it is necessary to formulate clear planning and management policies, and governments are the logical source for such planning (Murphy, 1985). Ashley (1998) cites the following policies among others: tourism planning and policy – clear policy statement in support of community involvement in tourism, tourism regulations/standards – registration system accessible to rural residents, land use planning – land planning that incorporates community views and credit, tax, incentives – access to credit for small enterprises.

Private sector support: Most successful CBT ventures have had some form of support from the private sector as was evident at the Shewula

Mountain Camp. CBT funders need to pay attention to the operational plan of the CBT ventures. The private sector, especially tour operators, need to incorporate CBT ventures in their packages. The Shewula Mountain Camp and Ngwempisi Hiking Trails have shown how important tour operators are in their operations. Collaboration among tourism stakeholders such as tour operators and CBT is vital to the success of CBT.

A collective effort from the STA, government, the private sector and communities is needed to develop market-ready products and assist communities in product development. A partnership between CBT ventures and the private sector could contribute to the success of CBT. Tour operators could include the services offered by a CBT venture in their tour packaging; thus benefiting the CBT ventures. Simpson (2008) highlights that there seems to be a growing interest, understanding and appreciating within the industry of the importance of supporting communities. Intermediaries such as private companies, membership organisations, public sector institutions and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have a huge role to play in CBT (Forstner, 2004).

Conclusion

Even though recent industry development in tourism is paying more attention to local actors, it is argued that structural causes of uneven and unequal development will dampen any potential positive impacts related to poverty alleviation in developing countries (Issac & Van der Sterren, 2004). For many countries, such as Swaziland and Lesotho, CBT is a new dimension of tourism and many

communities are not familiar with the operations of such projects. There is evidence that the large majority of CBT initiatives enjoy very low levels of success (Goodwin & Santilli, 2009). Contrary to the successful CBT projects, some have found it difficult to continue operating, as with the case in Namibia and the cases in Swaziland explained in the article.

Goodwin and Santilli (2009) state that, whilst many projects have been funded in developing countries, their success (or otherwise) has not been widely monitored and, therefore, the actual benefits to local communities remain largely unquantified. They maintain the importance of recording, measuring and reporting the impacts of these interventions in order to determine whether communities and households have either benefited or been impoverished. Despite the criticism, a number of CBT project case studies have revealed that given certain conditions such as continuous flow of funds, sound business plans, good technical support and inventive market linkages, significant results can indeed be achieved (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010).

The study found that there are a number of challenges that need to be addressed for CBT to thrive. Many respondents stated that the government of Swaziland should take responsibility in leading the way to uplift the declining CBT ventures. The recommendations suggested in this article could be useful not only in Swaziland but in other developing countries as well.

Communities are interested to seeing these ventures benefit them, but have no financial means and expertise to see their dreams come true. It may be concluded that CBT can be a success

in Swaziland through a collective effort from all stakeholders concerned.

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