

Enhancing Community Participation in Ecotourism through a Local Community Participation Improvement Model

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the model that can be used to improve local community participation in ecotourism development processes. The study was conducted at the communities adjoining the Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. A mixed methods design was adopted by the study during collection and analysis of data. A total of 384 respondents were sampled through convenience sampling technique. Questionnaires were used to collect data through face-to-face surveys. The study found that local communities had not been actively participating in ecotourism development processes, especially those undertaken within the rural setting as a result of different socio-economic factors including lacking necessary skills. This study asserts that this gap could be mitigated through implementation of local community participation improvement model (LCPIM) based on its potential for influencing enactment and/or amendment of policies on ecotourism development.

Keywords: Community participation; ecotourism; local community participation improvement model; neoliberalism; KwaZulu-Natal

Introduction

A recent report released by the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC) indicates that the global economic contribution of the travel and tourism industry was estimated at \$8.8 trillion during 2018 (WTTC, 2019). Tourism industry has grown rapidly for the past eight years such that its growth had been considered to surpass the global economy. For instance, the industry's growth was estimated at 3.9% compared to 3.2% growth for the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Furthermore, the industry's contribution towards the total global economic activities is estimated at 10.4% with 10% equivalent to 319 million job opportunities created globally (WTTC, 2019). As a result, tourism and hospitality industry has been considered as a fundamental mechanism with which the socio-economies of numerous nations in the world could be enhanced significantly (Eshun & Tichaawa, 2019; Eshun & Tichaawa, 2020).

Notwithstanding its significant socio-economic implications, tourism development and related activities can result into numerous adverse effects, especially within the local communities, and these include: disrupting, disturbing and/or damaging natural habits, and negatively effect on socio-economic potential of the local communities (Carter, Durham, Driscoll & Honey, 2015). Rogerson and Visser (2004) argue cogently that tourism development and related activities can engender numerous social, ecological, cultural and economic effects that can be hazardous within the local communities, especially in the rural setting. In addressing these antagonistic effects, ecotourism had been considered to be more effective hence both cultural and environmental conservation are among its fundamental objectives (Fennell, 2014; Lawson & Weaver, 2015; Kimbu & Tichaawa, 2018; Yasu, Baños & Hazael, 2018). As a subsequence, ecotourism emerged and had been given more attention by numerous nations in the world including African countries such as Kenya, Ecuador, Costa Rica and South Africa as a form of tourism that can promote what authors such as Brechin, Wilshusen, Fortwangler and West (2002) refer to it as the ‘pragmatic middle ground’, meaning, the ability to simultaneously stimulate both ecological and non-ecological benefits to the local communities. This view is concurred by McKercher (2010); Wang, Zhong and Chen (2015) when upholding that ecotourism became one of the popular sub-sets of the tourism industry since 1980s resulting from its ecological and non-ecological benefits. Ecological benefits refer to services rendered by the natural environment to the nearer communities, and they include: livestock fodder, fresh water, food, herbs, and building material. Non-ecological benefits include: economic opportunities, employment, capacity building, and multiplier effect derived from ecotourism activities (Swemmer, Grant, Annecke & Freitag-Ronaldson, 2015). Hector Cebellos-Lascurain, a Mexican ecologist and one of the central figures in the discipline of ecotourism, defines ecotourism as travelling responsibly to relatively fragile destinations for the purpose of studying, admiring, enjoying natural landscapes, fauna and flora, while respecting the culture of the nearer communities (Fennel, 2008). It could be noticed that this definition only covers the ecological aspect of ecotourism.

In their definitions, Burns (2005), Fung and Wong (2007), Moran-Cahusac (2009) and Sangpikul (2010) define ecotourism as travelling to nature-based destinations to experience and learn about natural resources, landscape, fauna and flora and their habitats, while embracing the culture and appreciating the socio-economic needs of the nearer communities. These authors’ definitions incorporate both ecological and non-ecological aspects of ecotourism. However, Chireshe and Plattner (2010) contend that the majority of inhabitants of developing countries including South African citizens are impoverished and yet, most of these countries are characterised by scenic natural resources that can be used for ecotourism purposes. Schoemann (2002) and National Development Plan-2030 maintain that most parts of South Africa are considered to be impoverished as the majority of the citizens are struck by abject poverty which manifests through unemployment, crime and income inequality. Amongst the central pillars of ecotourism development and popularity is participation of local communities. Thus, Honey (2008) and Fletcher (2009) uphold that participation of local communities in ecotourism activities has been declared by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) as vital ingredient for ecotourism development. By definition, community participation refers to a process whereby inhabitants of the communities adjoining ecotourism sites are actively engaged or involved in ecotourism development processes undertaken within their communities (Magi & Nzama, 2009).

Apparently, success of ecotourism activities undertaken within a specific region hinges largely on the support from local communities (Masberg & Morales, 1999). Despite being considered as an essential component of ecotourism development, local community participation has not been fully adopted by some ecotourism destinations. One of these

destinations is the KwaZulu-Natal Province which has been depicted as non-compliant in integrated participatory approach (IPA) to ecotourism development as a result of perceived poor local community participation in ecotourism activities within the province (Department of Environmental Affairs & Tourism [DEAT], 1996). One of the most prevalent impediments to local community participation in ecotourism development processes is lack of necessary skills. Implications for lack of skills that can necessitate local community participation in ecotourism development activities can neither be ignored nor downplayed. According to the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (1996), local communities have not adequately been empowered with necessary skills and financial resources necessary for their participation in ecotourism development processes, such as planning and decision-making. Likewise, certain regions such as the Ugu District in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, have also been characterised by poor local community participation in ecotourism development processes due to lack of empowerment and necessary credentials (Ugu District Municipality, 2015/16). In the context of ecotourism development, community empowerment can be understood as the effort to fully involve local communities in planning and/or decision-making processes regarding ecotourism projects (Gumede & Nzama, 2019). Against this background, the study seeks to establish if there is a model that can be developed to facilitate local community participation in ecotourism development processes.

Literature review

Local communities and their level of participation in ecotourism

The development, success and sustainability of ecotourism depend largely on active participation of various stakeholders (Stronza, 2006; Kline & Slocum, 2015; Snyman, 2016). In essence, the legacy and success of ecotourism never occur in isolation, it is attributed to inclusive participation of a variety of stakeholders who engage in planning, resourcing and leading during ecotourism development processes (Stone, 2015). Stakeholders can be understood as all parties or actors that can affect and/or be affected by the success and/or failure of ecotourism activities (Garvare & Johansson, 2010). In the context of ecotourism, stakeholders can range from public sector, private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), tourism operators, tourism sites, academic researchers, as well as local communities (Snyman, 2016). All these stakeholders play different roles depending on their capacity, type of ecotourism and necessary level(s) of participation (Stronza, 2006; Kline & Slocum, 2015; Snyman, 2016). In order to complement one another, a strong relationship and networking need to exist among stakeholders as these two factors are considered to be the most important ingredients towards proper planning, development and sustainability of ecotourism activities (Anderson, 2009; Sangpikul, 2010). In essence, dedication and productivity of stakeholders towards ecotourism development activities need to be on a par with adequate level of stakeholders' satisfaction with the manner in which the activities are operationalized. In overall, well-being of all stakeholders involved in ecotourism development activities needs to be given an optimal attention and ensured at all costs. However, the literature reveals that there has been a paucity of research on ecotourism since 1980s that has paid attention to 'well-being' as a concept that needs to be thoroughly explored and/or critiqued (Kiss, 2004; Eshun, 2011; Eshun & Tonto, 2014; Eshun, Adjei & Baah, 2015).

According to Eshun and Tichaawa (2019), well-being remains one of the areas that had been insufficiently studied in ecotourism research despite being a cardinal tenet of this sector. Although numerous ecotourism activities are undertaken within the marginalised, poverty struck and unskilled local communities (Coria & Calfucura, 2012), literature reveals that ecotourism sites managers are more concerned with conservation and staging of natural resources for monetary gains than well-being and satisfaction of local communities (Fletcher,

2009; Kline & Slocum, 2015). The practice of staging of natural resources for monetary gains is referred to by McCarthy and Prudham (2004) as ‘neoliberalisation of nature’, a process whereby natural resources are increasingly subjected to market-oriented systems of management and development. This practice subscribes to the neoliberalism theory of development which upholds market efficiency, promotion of material growth, minimal state interference, profit maximisation as well as commodification of natural resources as means by which poverty can be alleviated (Fletcher, 2009; Kline & Slocum, 2015). Duffy (2008) maintains that ecotourism has been used as a means by which natural resources have been exponentially neoliberalised. With a similar perspective, Buscher (2010) attests that promulgation of ecotourism as a catalyst for conservation of natural resources and socio-economic growth has been underpinned mainly by the neoliberalism agenda. Another point of imperative importance is a noticeable paucity of literature on significance of local community participation in planning and management of ecotourism. Perhaps, these are the main factors (inadequacy of ecotourism research on well-being, neoliberalisation of nature and paucity of literature on local community participation in ecotourism development processes) that have directly impacted on the perceived inadequate participation of local communities in ecotourism development activities in most parts of the world including South Africa.

Although, the concept ‘local community participation’ has emerged, been popularised and advocated, especially in developing countries as one of the essential components or principles of ecotourism development (United Nations Development Programme, 2003; Honey, 2008; Fletcher, 2009; Wang et al., 2015), numerous developing countries, especially those within the African continent have been declared as non-compliant to this phenomenon. For instance, the study conducted by Eshun et al. (2015) indicates that ecotourism activities undertaken in the Owabi Wildlife Sanctuary in Ghana are more concerned with conservation of natural resources than the well-being of local communities. Likewise, the KwaZulu-Natal, one of the most attractive and lucrative ecotourism destination in South Africa, has also been depicted as non-compliant to the integrated participatory approach as a result of perceived poor local community participation in ecotourism development processes (DEAT, 1996). Meng, Jun and Zhengzheng (2009) caution that it would be mirage for ecotourism to realise its connotation and achieve its objectives without active participation of local communities. With a similar view, participatory theory of development asserts that all stakeholders should actively participate in ecotourism development activities in an equitable and effective manner (Vaidya & Mayer, 2014). According to the authors, there are different types of participatory approaches that are applicable within the context of ecotourism, and they are internally and externally initiated and driven. A typical example of internally initiated and driven participatory approach to ecotourism development is the expect-assisted approach, which comprises participants who directly benefit from ecotourism development activities with their decisions and/or actions determining and/or influencing the sustainability of ecotourism development. In other words, participants are the ones who define the problem, identify sustainability indicators and generate final set of indicators (Simon & Etienne, 2009). There are two types of stakeholder groups that are involved in this type of participatory approach, and they are: community-based stakeholders, and system-based stakeholders. Community-based stakeholders consist of local community members also referred to here as ‘end beneficiaries’ and academic researchers who often facilitate discussions and enable participants to define problems and suggest possible solutions (Vaidya & Mayer, 2014). System-based stakeholders comprise participants of a mixed representatives from the public, private as well as governing sectors with an ability to influence operationalisation of ecotourism development initiative. This enables participants to identify indicators based on the demonstrated or modelled utility to monitor the activity,

thereby fast-tracking the criteria, indicators analysis as well as consensus-building process (Marques, Ramos, Caeiro & Costa, 2013).

Against this backdrop, we considered the expert-assisted approach as pertinent to this paper as it enables local community members under the auspices of the academic researchers an opportunity to identify, define and suggest possible solutions to the problems or challenges that may hinder the acquisition of the anticipated outcome(s) from ecotourism development process. In a nutshell, this approach embraces bottom-up problem solving approach to ecotourism development. Moreover, as indicated elsewhere in the text that unemployment, poverty and shortage of skills are among the key challenges that the South African citizens are faced with, the approach can serve as an appropriate platform through which precise and genuine challenges based on local communities' concerns or felt needs can be consolidated and communicated with relevant structures for review and/or decision-making purposes. Although there are existing models such as the initial and revised linear model approaches of local community participation in planning and management of ecotourism activities developed by Drake (1991) and Garrod (2003) that advocate participation of local communities in ecotourism development processes, there are shortcomings or drawbacks that have been identified in these model approaches. For example, both model approaches uphold determining both the role of local community participation in ecotourism projects and appropriate mechanisms for participation. Although these may be important initiatives towards ensuring inclusive participation in ecotourism development processes, the model approaches do not provide a precise delineation on the appropriate structures that can represent local communities during different phases of ecotourism projects life-cycle as the roles played by stakeholders differ in terms of the required standard(s) of participation and/or capacity (Snyman, 2016). Buckley (2009) and Fennell (2014) espouse that local communities need not to be marginalised but be involved in all aspects of ecotourism development such as planning and decision-making processes. The model approaches do not suggest any appropriate mechanism(s) or platform(s) that can enable local communities and other stakeholders to identify and/or discuss challenges and/or problems in order to reach possible consensus regarding feasible solutions. Myeza, Mason & Peddemors (2010) caution that exclusion of local communities to participate in ecotourism activities may result into numerous threats to its development, and these include: criminal offences against tourists, marauding and vandalism. Moreover, the model approaches do not take into account diversity in terms of the context within which they can be applicable. They are presented in a manner that portrays them as panacea or one-size-fits-all model approaches. In effect, the applicability and effectiveness of a model need to be aligned with the context within which it would be implemented. Against this backdrop, we hold a cogent argument that there is a need for developing a model that would contribute towards addressing the shortcomings identified in the existing model approaches for facilitating local community participation in ecotourism development processes.

Materials and methods

In what follows, this study makes use of two case studies (Coastal Forest Reserve in Maputaland and Ugu Sardine Run Festival at Ugu District) to exemplify ecotourism destinations within the KwaZulu-Natal that have been non-compliant to local community participation. Located in the north eastern coast of the KwaZulu-Natal and largely rural-based traditional settlement under the leadership of Tembe Traditional Council (TTC), Maputaland is known to be the prime ecotourism destination resulting from the uniqueness of its natural resources and cultural sensitivity (Ngubane & Diab, 2005). One of the important amenities found in this region is the Coastal Forest Reserve (CFR) which was established in 1952 and attracts numerous ecotourists. However, the inhabitants of Maputaland, especially the Black

community, have been deprived of the opportunity to participate in planning and decision-making processes regarding operationalisation of the CFR. To some extent, they feel betrayed by the authorities (community leaders) given the fact that the CFR had been built on the land that was forcefully dispossessed from them.

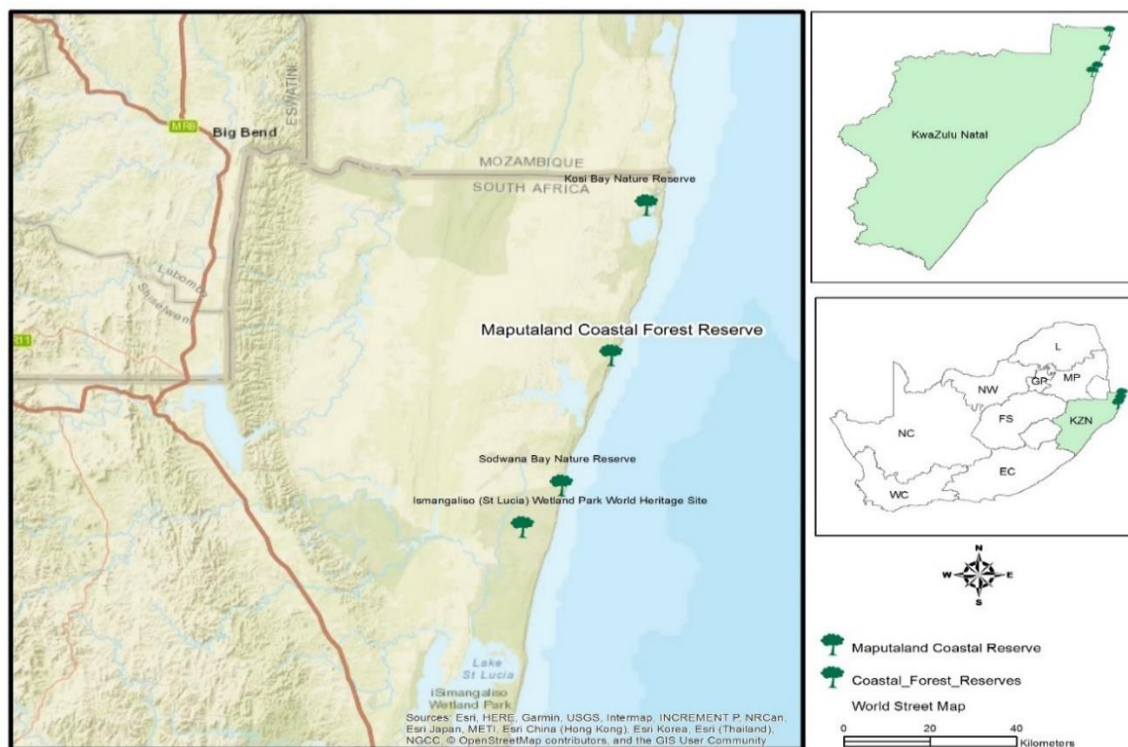


Figure 1. Geographical position of Maputland and Coastal Forest Reserve. Source: Authors.

Although CFR provides low baseline job opportunities to locals, this could have been discretionary; hence, there is no existing policy on prioritising the employment of local inhabitants by the reserve (Ngubane & Diab, 2005). In addition to the resentment borne by the locals engendered by, among other things, a sense of alienation and/or atrocity of losing their land over the establishment of CFR, is the contention that the reserve advocates fortress conservation. Hence, this form of conservation upholds creation and intensive management of protected areas (PAs) characterised by exclusion of local communities from nature-based areas. It agitates for eradication of human impact on natural environments such that nature-based areas are extensively protected against local communities' access either by force or coercion using any means necessary (Adams, 2004; Hutton, Adams & Murombedzi, 2005; Swemmer et al., 2015). Thondhlana and Cundill (2017) concur that fortress conservation triggers socio-economic challenges, such as land dispossession and conflict between nature-based areas' officials and local communities. The dissatisfaction of the locals triggered the launch of several land claims which included that of the entire CFR. This was done under the Restitution of Land Rights Act (Act No. 22 of 1994) with the Commission on Restitution of Land Rights (Ngubane & Diab, 2005).

Ugu Sardine Run Festival in Ugu District Municipality

Ugu District, one of forty-four districts in South Africa and one of eleven districts in KwaZulu-Natal, is a category C municipality located in the far south of the province. The total population of the district is 753 336 and predominantly inhabited by Black/African population constituting

90.6 percent (StatsSA, 2016). One of the prominent and lucrative tourism attractions in the district is the marine ecotourism event popularly known as the Ugu Sardine Run Festival (SRF). SRF refers to gathering of local and international tourists to embrace and/or celebrate migration of millions of sardines along the east coast from the Agulal Bank towards the waters of KwaZulu-Natal (Myeza et al., 2010). The festival takes place annually along the Hibiscus Coast between Port Edward and Hibberdene and attracts thousands of tourists from countries, such as England, Netherlands, German, etc. who participate in a variety of activities, namely: swimming with the shoals, diving, and microlight flights (Myeza et al., 2010; Van der Lingen, Coetzee & Hutchings, 2010).

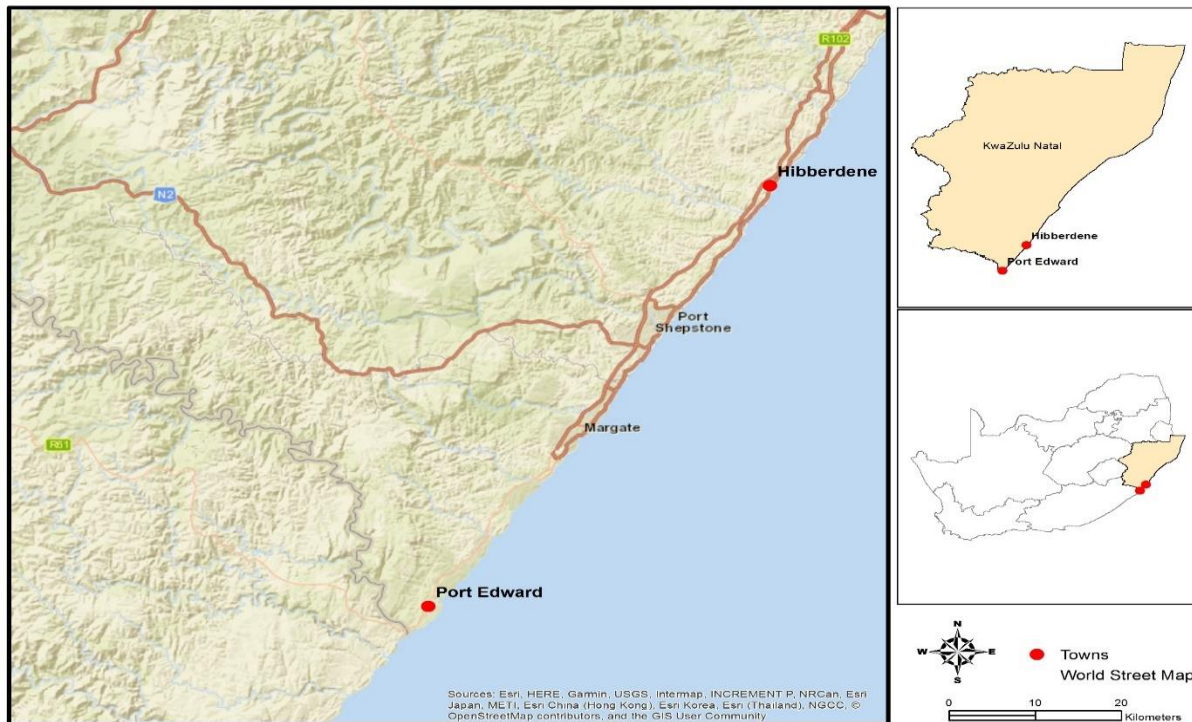


Figure 2. Map showing Port Edward and Hibberdene. Source: Authors.

However, there has been a very low participation of members of the nearer Black communities in this event compared to that of Whites, Indians and Coloureds. As a result, most of the revenue generated from the event is shared amongst these three ethnic groups as they own most of tourism enterprises, such as accommodation and culinary facilities within the district (Myeza et al., 2010). Drawing from the case studies, it could be said that community members, especially black inhabitants of the KwaZulu-Natal Province have not been actively involved in ecotourism development processes. This exclusion might have resulted from different socio-economic factors, such as lack of skills, lack of awareness, lack of resources, and apathy. Ironically, the exclusion of local people from participation in ecotourism development activities may result in considerable threats to the sector, namely: crime, antagonistic community attitude towards ecotourism, and fracture state between officials and local communities concerned.

Study area

This study covered the communities (Murchison and Eshobeni) adjacent to the Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study area is situated within the Ray Nkonyeni Local Municipality under Ugu District and covers approximately 1594 km² of

geographical areas with 36 electoral wards (Ray Nkonyeni Municipality, 2016/17). The basis for choosing the study area includes its economic potential resulting from ecotourism activities, proximity, and comparative advantage. Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve has been considered as the main ecotourism attraction within Ugu District and one of the most popular in KwaZulu-Natal. The reserve's comparative advantage over other tourism attractions, especially at the municipal level, hinges largely on its scenic environment and natural resources that have been used to promote tourism towards the province (Jitpakdee & Thapa, 2012).

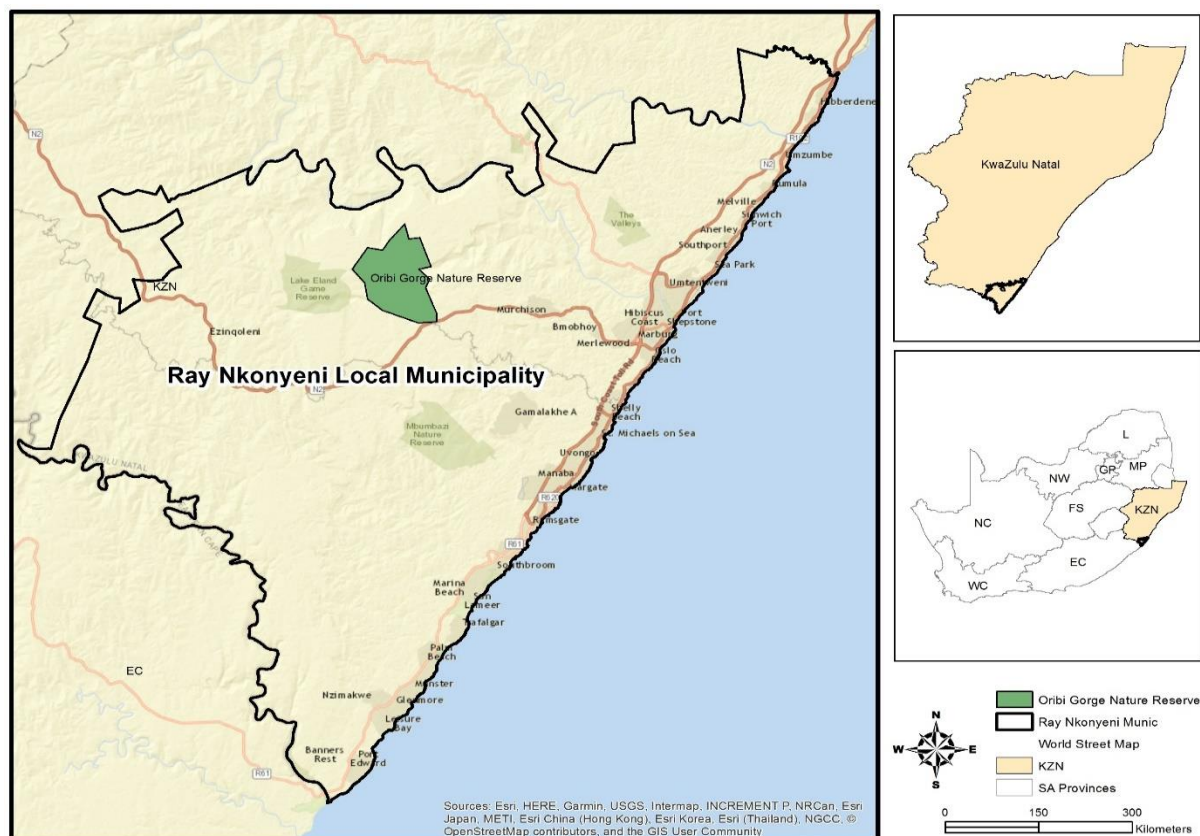


Figure 3. Geographical position of the study area of this research. Source. Authors.

Design, methods of sampling, collection and analysis of data

Ethical and safety issues such as ethical clearance, permission to conduct research, informed consent and confidentiality were considered important in this study before the data were collected. Acquisition of ethical clearance and permission to conduct research ensured eligibility granted by the university and relevant authorities, such as community leaders to conduct the research. Informed consent and confidentiality ensured voluntary participation in the study, consideration and protection of respondents' rights. Pragmatism paradigm was adopted by the study based on its subscription to sensible and practical understanding, and suitability for mixed methods research. A mixed methods design was used to collect and analyse the data. Target population of the study comprised of the municipal official, community leaders, community tourism organisation representative, Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve's personnel, and community members that were all sampled through convenience sampling technique. A sample of 384 was computed through Research Advisors Spreadsheet (2016) from a total population of 348 553. Questionnaires comprising semi-structured questions were used to collect data through face-to-face surveys. Qualitative data were analysed by means of

content analysis where data were categorised into codes to generate themes and/or sub-themes. That is to say, large quantities of data obtained from unstructured questions were minimised to suit analysis. Importantly, content analysis has been the most used technique in recent years to analyse studies on ecotourism (Sangpikul, 2010). Quantitative data were cleaned and analysed through Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. Pearson correlation coefficient was used to determine relationships between dependent and independent variables (i.e. income and gender of the respondents, and income and education of the respondents) using bi-variate correlation analysis.

The pilot study was conducted to test the validity and reliability of the survey questionnaire (Finn, Elliot & Walton, 2000). This study was conducted in ward 10 of the Ray Nkonyeni Local Municipality located within the KwaNzimakwe Traditional Settlement. The questionnaire was piloted once in 2 days (21 and 22 July 2018) to 25 respondents. All questionnaires were valid; hence, they were no shortfalls on the collected data. The internal reliability was measured through Cronbach’s alpha coefficient and turned out to be 0.90, which indicated high reliability of the piloted survey questionnaire. From this outcome, the piloted questionnaire was formalised and considered valid and reliable to be used for collection of data in the main study.

Results and discussion

Socio-demographic and socio-economic attributes of the respondents

The socio-demographic (gender and age) and socio-economic (education and income) characteristics of the respondents were considered important, hence they contributed towards achieving the objectives of the study. The response rate as shown in table 1 indicates that females constituted the majority (53%) in terms of participation in the study. According to the IDP report of Ray Nkonyeni Municipality (2016/17), this finding may have been attributed to two reasons, which are: the outmigration of males to other municipalities in search for job opportunities, and the fact that the total number of females exceeds that of males in the province and the country at large. The youths between 18 and 28 years dominated the study, constituting 33% of the total respondents. This aligns with the finding of the StatsSA (2019) survey which indicates that youths between 15 and 34 years constitute the highest population category within the study area. The respondents who were between 29 and 39 years accounted for 28% of the total respondents. These were followed by those who had 40 to 50 years at 17%. Perhaps, it could be said that the response rate in the above categories (29-39 and 40-50) was attributed to the fact that most people in these age categories are employed. Therefore, they might not have been available during the week when a significant portion of data were collected. Those who were between 51 and 61 accounted for 14% while those who had 62 and above years constituted a least percentage in terms of participation as they constitute only 8% of the total respondents. A meagre response rate in the second last and last categories might have been triggered by the fact that people in these categories constitute a least percentage in the total population of the study area and the country.

Table 1. Socio-demographic and socio-economic attributes of the respondents: N=384

Variable and sub-variables	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Males	181	47
Females	203	53
Total	384	100
Age		
18-28	126	33
29-39	107	28
40-50	68	17



51-61	153				14	
62+	30				8	
Total	384				100	
Education level						
	Males	%	Females	%	Total Frequency	Total percentage
No education	25	6	22	6	47	12
Primary	51	13	65	17	116	30
Secondary	81	21	91	24	172	45
Tertiary	23	6	26	7	49	13
Total	180	46	204	54	384	100
Income level						
No income	39	10	75	20	114	30
<R1 000	12	3	26	7	38	10
R1 000-R5 000	78	20	69	18	147	38
R5 001-R10 000	23	6	16	4	39	10
R10 001-R15 000	13	3	7	2	20	5
R15 001-R20 000	12	3	10	3	22	6
R20 001+	3	1	1	–	4	1
Total	180	46	204	54	384	100

Education level of the respondents was considered important to determine the literacy and/or illiteracy rate of the respondents. Importantly, literacy levels may determine who does and/or does not participate in ecotourism development processes. The response rate as depicted in table 2 indicates that respondents with secondary education were the majority (45%) in terms of participation in the study, with females, except in no education category, dominating. The findings align with those of the StatsSA (2019) survey which indicates that inhabitants with secondary education constitute the majority of municipality's population. There was a noticeable gender imbalance regarding monthly income earnings pattern in the study area. Hence, males dominated in terms of monthly income in better paid categories i.e. R1 000-R5 000, R5 001-R10 000, R10 001-R15 000, R15 001-R20 000, and R20 000+.

Analysis to determine relationships between bi-variate variables

The findings as shown in table 2 indicate a low negative correlation (-0.191) between income and gender, at 0.0001 level of significance. The relationship between gender of the respondents and income levels demonstrates that females who were found to be the majority in terms of participation in the study earned low monthly income than males. The findings indicate a high percentage of males who earned between R1 001-R5 000, R5 001-R10 000, R10 001-R15 000, and R20 001 and above, compared to females who earned less than males in these monthly income levels. In this sense, there is a relationship between gender of the respondents and income levels. This finding is corroborated by Morve (2016) who affirms that South Africa remains one of those countries which are characterised by gender discrimination in terms of remunerations, such that females earn lower salaries than males who are equally productive. The second category dealt with the correlation between monthly income and education of the respondents. It was found that there is a weak positive correlation (0.214) at 0.0001 level of significance. This finding indicates that there is a relationship between monthly income and level of education. Hence, those respondents with high education earned high monthly income compared to those with low education. The findings, therefore, align with what Wolla and Sullivan (2017) concurs that there is a strong relationship between education and income, such that those with high education tend to earn more income than those with low education.

Table 2. Correlation between variables and level of significance at $p < 0.01$

Variables	Correlation r	Significance, $p < 0.01$
Income and gender	-0.191	0.0001
Income and education	0.214	0.0001



The majority of the respondents (52%) were not sure whether the community members participate in ecotourism development processes or not. However, based on the responses between those who affirmed and those who disagreed, an inference that community members of the study area do not participate in ecotourism development processes was made. This was supported by one of the community leaders who said:

Both as community representatives and members of the nearer community, we never participated or asked for our opinions on participating in ecotourism activities undertaken at the Oribi Gorge Nature Reserve.

Table 3. Community participation in ecotourism development processes

Response	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	25	6
No	161	42
Not sure	198	52
Total	384	100

Testing of the research hypothesis

The results of the empirical analysis as shown in table 4 indicate that the hypotheses of the study were supported. The findings indicate that community members of the study area do not participate in ecotourism development processes (*H1*); hence, there is a need for developing a proposed model (*H2*). In this study, the hypotheses were tested using a Chi-square goodness-of-fit test to verify rejection or acceptance of the null hypotheses. Conclusions on the rejection or acceptance of the null hypotheses were drawn based on the nature of the calculated values (*p-values*) at 0.05 level of significance. That is to say, if the calculated value becomes equal or less than 0.05, the null hypotheses had to be rejected and vice versa (Kothari, 2004).

Table 4. Chi-square test: participation of community members in ecotourism development processes

Test statistics	
Chi-square	1.033 ^a
Df	1
Asymp.Sig.	.310

a. 2 cells (33.3%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is .72.

The findings indicate a good fit between the observed and expected values at $X^2(1) = 1.033$, $P = 0.310$, which means that there is no relationship between community members of the study area and participation in ecotourism development processes. Thus, there is a need for developing a model for addressing this gap.

The need for the LCPIM

The findings on participation of community members in ecotourism development processes in the study area coupled with the assertion made by Poudel, Nyaupane and Budruk (2014) indicate that most local communities have neither been participating nor benefiting from ecotourism activities undertaken in the proximity of their communities. These findings served as the basis for the need for developing the LCPIM. Literature reveals that when local people participate in ecotourism development processes, the sector could significantly benefit through environmental conservation and economic returns (Li, 2006; Fletcher, 2009; Somarriba-Chang & Gunnarsdotter, 2012; Lekaota, 2015). Thus, the definition of the concept ‘ecotourism’ is inextricably connected with community participation (Adeleke, 2015). The LCPIM seeks to form conceptual basis for planning, formulation, implementation and management of policies related to participation of local communities in tourism-oriented initiatives (Gumede, 2019).

Participatory ecotourism development approach adopted by most developing countries has been deeply embedded within the Western context. Mostly, the Western-centric oriented participation frameworks imposed by states' administrators do not suit the developing world's context (Botes & Van Rensburg, 2000). Thus, it is important that the LCPIM aligns with the context within which it would be implemented.

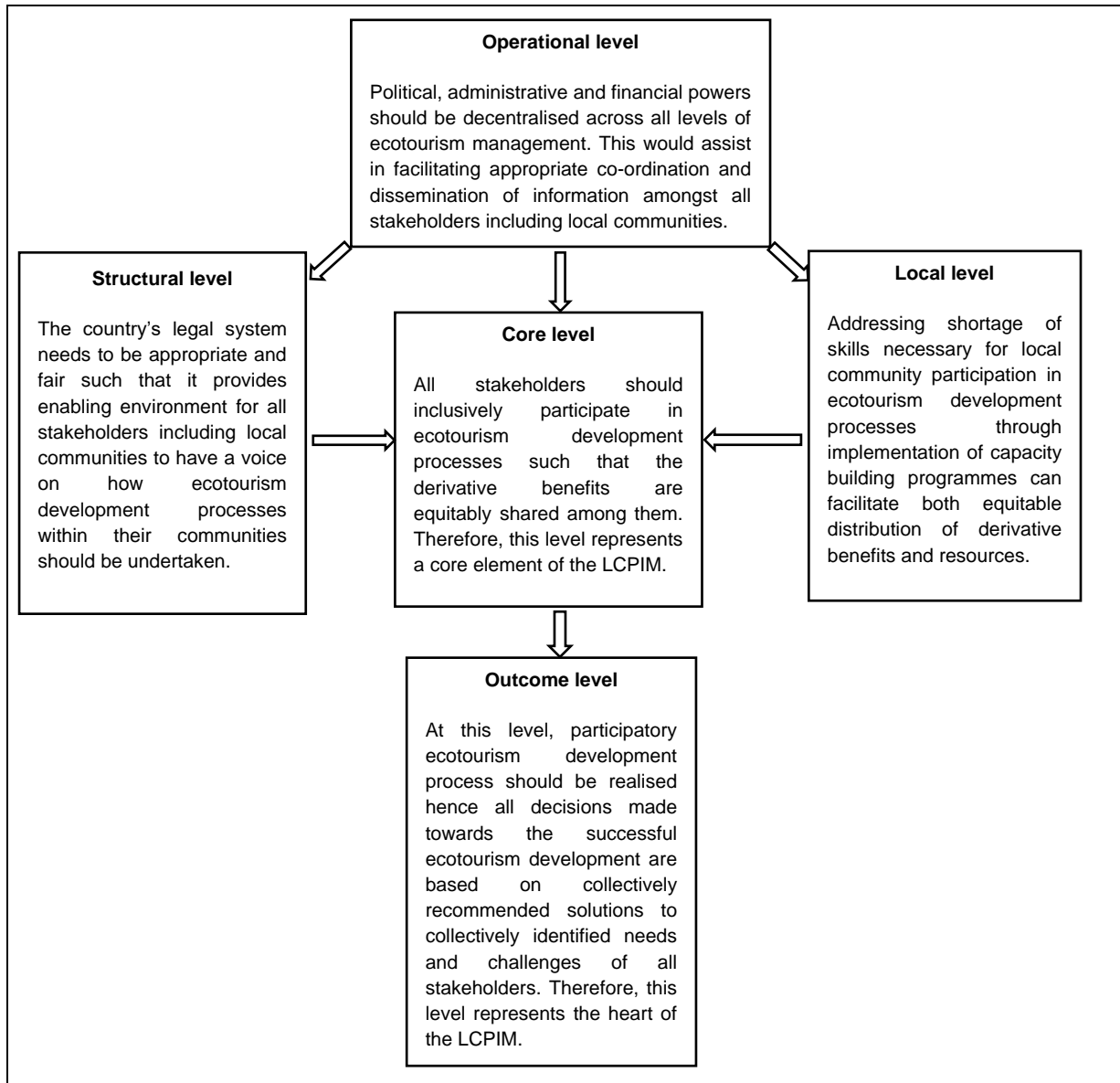


Figure 4. The Local Community Participation Improvement Model: Source: Authors.

Unpacking the components of the LCPIM

The LCPIM comprises five interlinked components in the form of levels which were identified as important in improving local community participation in ecotourism development processes. These levels are as follows: (1) operational level, (2) structural level, (3) local level, (4) core level, and (5) outcome level. These were deemed important based on two reasons, which are: their relevance to the contextual setting of the study, and when interlinked, inclusive participation in ecotourism development processes, especially in the context of developing countries could be enhanced. The first three levels (operational, structural, and local levels) relate to different institutional levels and their roles in ecotourism development processes in

KwaZulu-Natal. The other two levels (core and outcome levels) relate to the expected outcome resulting from the interlinkage of operational, structural and local levels.

Operational level

Operational level comprises three elements (decentralisation of public administration of ecotourism, appropriate co-ordination amongst involved parties, and dissemination of information) and focuses on how ecotourism development processes could be enhanced through implementing the above elements.

Decentralisation of public administration of ecotourism

Decentralisation of powers from national to local levels of governance serve as an essential requirement towards successful formulation and/or implementation of community participation initiatives (Tosun, 2000; United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), 2000; World Bank, 2000). This element aims at increasing popular participation to promote local management and development in an equitable and efficient fashion (Ribot, 2003). In the context of ecotourism, decentralisation of power aims to reshape locally-based institutions that are responsible for the management of natural resources to increase participation in a manner that could profoundly benefit those who manage, use and benefit from these resources (Ribot, 2003). However, in most developing countries including South Africa, the overall authority for public administration has been vested in the central government under the direct management of political executives. As a result, decentralisation of power to manage natural resources has often been lacking local representation and downward accountability (Tosun, 2000; Ribot, 2003). It was for this reason that the World Bank (2000) reported that decentralisation has often been haphazardly implemented. For instance, the influence of community-level groups regarding management of natural resources has been extensively restricted and widely characterised by vertical distance between those who are responsible for planning and broad masses (Tosun, 2000).

In the South African context, development, monitoring and administration of tourism policies have been solely undertaken by the central government in a manner that ensures the achievement of predetermined objectives of national administrators. Similarly, central governments for many developing countries have been reluctant to delegate administrative powers to either provincial or local authorities (Tosun, 2000). This depicts reluctance by central governments to realise development ideals including participatory ecotourism development approach. Thus, the LCPIM upholds decentralisation of administrative powers from national to provincial and local spheres of governance. Although the Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (EKZNW) in terms of the KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Management Act (Act No.9 of 1997) has been mandated to direct the management and conservation of natural resources and facilitate development and promotion of ecotourism in the province, local governments have not been empowered to influence decisions on development of ecotourism. It is, therefore, anticipated that the development and existence of LCPIM could assist in addressing 'top-down' geared public administration and serve as a linkage between different spheres of governance to enable local community participation in administration of their own affairs.

Dissemination of information

Numerous local communities of the developing countries, such as South Africa, lack information on ecotourism. This has been the result of insufficient availability of ecotourism-related data coupled with the fact that the only available information has been disseminated to public through incomprehensive means (Hall, 2008; Marzuki, Hay & James, 2012). In their study, Bello, Lovelock and Carr (2017) posit that local communities lack understanding of

ecotourism resulting from inadequate dissemination of tourism information from management agencies, government and NGOs. As a consequence, most inhabitants of local communities have been deterred from participating in ecotourism development processes. The LCPIM could be instrumental in enhancing local community participation in ecotourism development processes; hence, it advocates equitable dissemination of information amongst all stakeholders through comprehensive forms.

Structural level

This level of LCPIM focuses on how the South Africa's legal system, if it is appropriately implemented at all spheres of governance, could contribute towards enhancing local community participation in ecotourism development processes.

Appropriate legal system at national, provincial and local levels

It is argued that participatory ecotourism development process may create platforms for unorganised legal structures to participate in policy-making processes (Tosun, 2000). This may not negatively impact on the influence of those who are already participating in ecotourism development activities, such as interest groups, but it would do the defenceless locals. Appropriate legal structures aiming at defending local community interests and ensuring that community participatory right is exercised are required. Although there have been occurrences whereby legal structures discourage local people, especially in developing countries, to participate in their local affairs (Tosun, 2000), existence and/or accessibility of the LCPIM by relevant legal structures could encourage rigorous review and/or amendment of operational legal system at all levels of governance to prioritise participatory ecotourism development approach.

Local level

The local level of LCPIM focuses on how community development-oriented initiatives, such as equitable distribution of benefits and resources could contribute in facilitating local community participation in ecotourism development processes.

Equitable distribution of benefits

Equitable share of ecological and non-ecological benefits derived from ecotourism to local communities remained an advanced argument in support of local community participation in ecotourism development processes (Su & Wall, 2014). Ecotourism destinations' agencies advocate maximum distribution of ecotourism benefits to local communities in order to attract their participation in conservation and ecotourism development processes (Bello et al., 2017). However, apathy of local people to participate in ecotourism destinations' management and/or development processes has become more prevalent resulting from being denied access to natural resources. In general, communities adjoining ecotourism destinations quite often use some of natural resources for their well-being. For instance, they use the resources, such as fauna and flora for both subsistence and medicinal purposes. Usually, the communities are either denied this opportunity or, under strict surveillance, allowed to harvest as little grass and/or firewood as possible (Bello et al., 2017). Although some people from local communities benefit from ecotourism through employment, especially in low baseline positions, the majority who depend largely on natural resources for their well-being severely suffer (Snyman, 2013). Therefore, accessibility of the LCPIM to ecotourism destinations' officials and management agencies, such as EKZNW could facilitate equitable share of benefits derived from ecotourism to all stakeholders including local people. It is anticipated that the LCPIM would significantly contribute towards inclusive participation and ensuring share of equal

important status amongst all stakeholders involved in participatory ecotourism development processes.

Equitable distribution of resources

There has been a growing interest in local community development initiatives resulting from their capacity for addressing socio-economic challenges (Matarrita-Cascante & Brennan, 2012). Review of literature reveals that local community development initiatives differ in size, uniqueness and complexity (Westerveld, 2003; Muller & Tuner, 2007). Thus, resources required to achieve each initiative's aims and objectives are absolutely unique in nature. In this sense, there is no universal set of resources that could equitably satisfy the requirements of all sorts of local community development initiatives (Westerveld, 2003). In the context of LCPIM, equitable distribution of resources means that local community development initiatives are provided with necessary resources in line with their unique requirements. Gumede and Nzama (2019) posit that one of the main hindrances to community participation in ecotourism development processes is the lack of skills necessary in this regard. The majority of local people lack skills that necessitate their participation in ecotourism, most of whom are adults who have not gone beyond primary school education level (Bello, 2017; Gumede & Nzama, 2019). Governments of developing countries only provide skills development programmes to civil servants and employed citizens leaving out the majority of unemployed locals who are in desperate need of skills necessary for ecotourism development (Tosun, 2000). In an attempt to address this gap, the LCPIM could assist in redirecting governments' focus when planning capacity building programmes such that they also consider local people as target beneficiaries.

Core level

This level serves as the heart of the LCPIM without which the existence and/or implementation of other components could be meaningless. Hence, it upholds inclusive participation and equal share of important status by all stakeholders.

Inclusive participation and equal share of important status by all stakeholders

While there are many ecological and non-ecological attributes of ecotourism, it is undisputable that its success hinges extensively in collective participation of different stakeholders ranging from local communities, regional and international governments, private sector and NGOs (Kline & Slocum, 2015; Stone, 2015; Snyman, 2016). As a result, collaborative partnerships between all stakeholders involved in ecotourism processes have been considered to be a powerful mechanism with which beneficial ecotourism development could be achieved (Winson, 2006; Anderson, 2009). Thus, Martha Honey, the former Executive Director of the International Ecotourism Society (TIES) concurs:

For ecotourism to be viewed as a mechanism for development, it needs to consider and recognise the importance of involving all stakeholders (Fletcher, 2009: 269).

Drawing from the above literary background, the LCPIM intends to ensure that inclusive participation and equal share of important status by all stakeholders does not remain theoretical but becomes a concrete discourse.

Outcome level

This level serves to ensure that the ultimate goal of developing the LCPIM is achieved; hence, it upholds participatory ecotourism development process.

Participatory ecotourism development process

This is the expected outcome or an ultimate goal resulting from adoption or proper implementation of the LCPIM's interlinked components. Once the limitations to community participation in ecotourism development processes have been identified and addressed by implementing the components of the LCPIM, it is anticipated that there would be a significant opportunity for development regarding participatory ecotourism development processes within the study area and elsewhere.

Conclusion

Although local community participation has been considered as one of the important ingredients for successful ecotourism initiatives, the findings of this study coupled with literary evidence indicate that local community members have not been actively participating in ecotourism development processes. Based on this finding and as a contribution to the body of knowledge, the LCPIM has been developed and considered as a mechanism through which local community participation in ecotourism development processes could be enhanced. For instance, the LCPIM advocates collaborative effort towards ecotourism development such that each stakeholder plays a crucial role based on their participating capacity. In this sense, the LCPIM would be helpful in addressing possible fragmentation among various stakeholders thereby enforcing collaborative problem-solving and decision-making platforms whereby all stakeholders would contribute through their capacity towards ecotourism development. Importantly, the LCPIM suggests platforms such as the expert-assisted approach through which the concerns, possible hindrances and/or challenges to participatory ecotourism development can be raised, discussed and/or resolved through collective decision-making process. Although it could be a panacea, this study suggests that the LCPIM may be applicable in both developing and developed ecotourism destinations experiencing poor community participation in tourism development processes so long as it suits specific contextual requirements. The conclusions drawn by the study were based particularly on perceptions of the respondents. This was considered as a limitation hence the authors hold a view that the results could have been more strengthened if were informed by the actual behaviour or participation of the respondents. Therefore, further research that would compare tourists' and residents' perceptions on local community participation in the study area would be quite resourceful.

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