



The importance community participation in tourism development to ensure sustainable rural development

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Abstract

This study analysed the importance of community participation in tourism development with the aim to ensure the sustainable rural development in Nqileni village, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. A study of this nature is given credence through concerted efforts undertaken by governments of the developing world pursuing the development of tourism with the aim to address a myriad of socio-economic ills faced by the populace. This saw the study adopt a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews to solicit data from 20 members of the Nqileni village community. These community members were purposefully selected from different categories based on the role they play in the community in relation to tourism in the area. The results revealed that community viewed their participation to be paramount in development initiatives undertaken within the area and as such, such participation should allow for the building of capacity and ultimately empowerment for community members to meaningfully participate in the sustainable development of their area. Finally, the study recommended that the community leadership (government, traditional and business) encourage and enable the local community members to participate in tourism and other development activities to ensure endogenous development and minimise external control of development in the area.

Keywords: community participation, tourism development, sustainability, capacity building, decision-making.

Introduction

Developing countries have in recent times embarked on a course to intensify efforts in mitigating challenges associated with economic and social development with the aim to transform communities and improve the quality of the life for natives (Abiona & Bello, 2013). This has seen extensive efforts being undertaken to enhance the participation of citizens in development initiatives by way of cultivating a spirit of community social capital in line with the objectives of sustainable development (Zhu, 2015). In addition, this challenge allows for the promotion of community welfare aimed at enabling capacity to acquire better standards of living (Onabanjo, 2004). This requires that communities make an active and meaningful contribution in development initiatives aimed at improving and developing the areas in which they live.

Community participation in planning and management of development initiatives has in recent times seen a significant increase in importance and recognition (Aas, Lidkin, & Fletcher, 2005; Su & Wall, 2014), especially in relation to tourism because the preservation and development of resources needed for the development of tourism often represent interests of the local



communities and international authorities (Nunkoo, 2015). This has seen a recent widespread deliberation of community participation being a cornerstone of sustainable tourism development and planning (Lin & Simmons, 2017).

Community participation in tourism development

“The focal point for the supply of accommodation, catering, information, transport facilities and services. Their local natural environment, buildings and institutions, their people, culture and history, all form core elements of what the tourist come to see; whether as towns, villages or cities, every community has tourism at one level or the other and are affected by the growth and development of the industry” (Godfrey & Clarke, 2000: 3).

The development and planning paradigm has seen a significant evolution in the meteoric advance of tourism planning from myopic and rigid concerns to more inclusive, flexible, responsive, methodical and participatory approaches (Inskeep, 1994: 86; Tuson, 2006). This has been viewed to be an ideology deeply embedded in beliefs derived from the social and political theories relating to the manner in which society needs to be organised (Tuson, 2000). This has seen the success and sustainability of developing tourism destinations being dependent on the goodwill and active participation of the host communities (Nicholas, Thapa, Ko, 2009; Nicolaidis, 2015; Rasoolimanesh & Jafaar, 2016; Rasoolimanesh, Jafaar, Ahmad & Barghi, 2017).

The participation of communities in the development process usually takes consideration of people’s rights to information on matters that may affect them (O’Faircheallaigh, 2010). Community participation as an element of development has been advanced into the development process employing different names and terms by advocates of the phenomenon since the early 1950s (Tuson, 2000; Blewitt, 2015: 43). This is further articulated by Saufi, O’Brien and Wilkins (2014) advancing for a prerequisite empowerment of locals with adequate capacity in tourism in order to enable meaningful engagement in tourism development (Cole, 2006; Saufi, O’Brien & Wilkins, 2014). Moreover, approaches of this nature aim to advocate for the sustainable development of tourism as an agent sociocultural and economic development (Tosun, 2006).

The conception of community participation in tourism development stems from the operation of tourist activities by the local community with economic benefits retained locally together with the accrual of favourable social consequences such as, but not limited to tourism-related education and training (Saufi *et al.*, 2014). This notion places emphasis on the development of a socially acceptable tourism through advocating for local control and empowerment of the community, while ensuring meaningful participation in planning that aspires to be in line with the principles of sustainable development (Satuwa, 2012; Bello, Lovelock Carr, 2016). This conception is further advocated by scholars such as Arnstein (1969), Hibbard (1999), Scheyvens (2002: 239), Saufi *et al.*, (2014) and Bello *et al.*, (2016) in their indication of the need to afford the local community control and decision-making powers, thereby redistributing power that will enable and capacitate the community with the capacity to take advantage of accruable benefits that tourism often brings to an area.

It is a widely-held belief that a participatory development approach would better facilitate the implementation of principles of sustainability in the development of tourism, which can help create better opportunities for the local populace to accrue more positive and balanced gains from developments undertaken within the locality, thereby increasing the limits of tolerance of tourism (Tuson, 2000; Telfer & Sharpley, 2015: 12; Wanyama, 2016: 8). This can be attained through concerted efforts to access knowledge and the community’s ability to exert control and manage local tourism resources, which are elements closely linked to community participation in tourism development (Cole, 2006).



Timothy (2009); Nicolaidis (2015); Ying and Zhou (2007) and Saufi, O'Brien & Wilkins (2014) state that issues related to community participation can be viewed from two perspectives – (i) the communities' and concerns are to be incorporated into the tourism planning process, (ii) a true measure in relation to tourism development benefits to be accrued by the host community. Community participation in the development of tourism not only brings material benefits to the local population but also affords the community input in the planning, management and control of the tourism development process (Scheyvens, 2003).

The importance of local communities as important assets in tourism development is something that cannot be downplayed because these activities are undertaken within their premises (Su & Wall, 2014). This is seen in many destinations where local communities are often overlooked with regard to the control over the nature and direction of tourism development even though they are the supposed owners and custodians of the resources upon which tourism is based (Scheyvens, 2003; Aas *et al.*, 2005). These communities are in truth the legitimate and moral stakeholders in tourism development as their interests often affect and are affected by decisions made by developers and policy makers (Jamal & Stranza, 2009; McCool, 2009; Haukeland, 2011).

Pongponrat (2011) maintains that the development of tourism in a destination requires that the affected parties, especially local residents, be involved in the planning and implementation of policies and action plans in order to find common ground between perceptions of benefit and the reality of costs that can be brought by the development. The involvement of the affected parties (i.e. local communities) enables support for the development of tourism which presents local communities with a paradox stated by Wall (1996) and Su, & Wall (2014) indicating the positive (such as higher incomes and employment opportunities) and negative and often unintended (including, but not limited to inevitable modifications to lives) changes.

Inadequate consultation of local communities on decisions concerning the development of tourism during the design stage has the potential to make it impossible for residents to be involved during the implementation stage (Niezgoda & Czernek, 2008; Muganda, Sirima & Ezra, 2013). This can be mitigated through the provision of information to members of the host community in a destination, which can assist in terms of achieving meaningful participation of the community, allowing them to make informed decisions on the role played by the community, together with the potential impacts the development can have on the lives of the locals (Aas *et al.*, 2005; Su *et al.*, 2014). All this requires a concerted effort on all stakeholders from decision-making stage, to planning and implementation of development projects, which requires the building of capacity within the region.

Capacity building to enable community participation in sustainable rural development

Sustainability in tourism or any development requires a concerted effort on the part of developers to build strong adaptive capabilities within communities and the encouragement of consistent stakeholder participation (Tao & Wall, 2009; Budeanu, Miller, Moscardo & Ooi, 2016). These kinds of undertakings bring to the forth the benefit of empowering the host communities with the ability to participate in the changes that often occur when new developments are introduced and also allows them to manage and respond to both these planned changes and unpredictable circumstances (Mackelworth & Caric, 2009; Laessoe, 2010; Budeanu, Miller, Moscardo & Ooi, 2016). As mentioned in the previous chapter, capacity building encompasses an array of elements that are required of the community to enable and maintain sustainable development initiatives. This section aims to discuss the importance of the provision of training aimed at maintaining and sustaining the integrity of a destination.

a) Training

The survival, continuation and sustainability of a society is highly dependent on its ability to adapt, which requires the re-examination of core values together with their expression through



mechanisms including social institutions, processes and individual actions (Budeanu, Miller, Moscardo & Ooi, 2016). The above statement rings true to the development of tourism as it is often considered a tool for community development utilised by many local communities aiming to promote economic development within the area (Aref, Redzuan, Gill & Aref, 2010).

The building of capacity in a community for the purpose of sustainable development requires that community participants procure skills and knowledge to help them think and act in new ways (Aref, Redzuan & Gill, 2010). In addition, this allows for the development of skills and abilities that empower the local community to engage in decision-making processes and take actions appropriate for themselves as far as tourism development is concerned (Aref, Redzuan, Gill & Aref, 2010). This is further seen to be an important source in assisting tourism development and community development (Aref, Redzuan & Gill, 2010). Consequently, the endeavour to capacitate the community with the requisite knowledge and skills can assist in the following manner:

- Knowledge and the ability to define and suggest solutions for problems;
- Ability to critically evaluate proposed projects and activities;
- Local leadership and entrepreneurship;
- Specific technical and managerial skills in target areas;
- Networks and community cohesiveness;
- Equitable partnerships with external organisation;
- Resources and infrastructure, and
- Motivation and confidence (Moscardo, 2008: 10).

The enhancement of skills and knowledge within a community allows for the building of capacity, which in turn minimises the constraints that limit the community's ability to fully control their participation in tourism development (Cole, 2006: 39; Moscardo, 2008: 67; Aref, Redzuan, Gill & Aref, 2010).

Research methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach with an in-depth exploratory examination of community participation in the development of rural areas through tourism, particularly Nqileni village. The logic for qualitative research is not aimed at the testing of given theories but the appreciation of underlying motivations had by people for doing what they do and understanding meanings people have of their world and surroundings as these often govern their actions (Henn, Weisten & Foard, 2006: 182).

The study included 20 semi-structured interviews with community members in their different roles within the area (see table 1). The data was collected in isiXhosa using a digital recorder. These interviews averaged a duration of 20 minutes per interview. In addition, services of professionals were solicited for the transcription and translation of the data. The data was then professionally analysed by a specialist qualitative data analyst using NVivo software version 11, producing themes that allowed for the study to provide a clear picture of the importance of community participation in the development of sustainable rural tourism. This analysis was then accompanied by a comprehensive observation report which included nodes, word clouds, cluster analysis, tree maps and words trees to provide a clear picture of the views of the respondents engaged in the study, which were subsequently analysed and interpreted by the researchers.

Results and discussion

The results of the study undertook to table the demographic characteristics of the respondents followed by the views of the community on the importance of community participation in the development of tourism in Nqileni village.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the community who were found to be within ages ranging from 20 to over 60 years. These are residents of the village who have mostly been living in the area for a better part of their life, with the exception of a few respondents who have been residing in the village for a few years (1, 6 and 10 years). In addition, the respondents included ordinary members of the community together with entrepreneurs (tourism and others), employees of businesses serving tourists and local community leaders.

Importance of community participation in development



Figure 1: Word tree on importance of community participation in development

Understanding of 'community participation' in rural development

The community provides a unique perspective of the importance of community participation in rural development. This is seen in articulations related to the community's undertaking of participation opportunities in development initiatives emerging due to the development of tourism in Nqileni village. They mention among other things the local community's participation in the development of infrastructure (such as construction of roads and provision of water), the development of businesses that serve tourists and the community at large and other social



facilities. The respondents further allude to the engagements undertaken by the collective in terms of consultation of and input given by members of the community when it comes to development projects introduced to the village. This is stated as follows:

“The establishment of businesses by members of the community has been a key factor to community participation in the development of Nqileni village.”

“Since Bulungula lodge, there was a crèche due to the formation of Bulungula lodge. We are also in the process of initiating the building of a high school, which will conclude at Grade 12.”

“And having genuine meetings where there is an ability to shift your understanding of things. It’s not just an information session. It’s (Indistinct) giving the community an opportunity to have a say so in what it is.”

“Um...it’s a first consultation. I don’t think you’re gonna have community...genuine community participation that means something without consulting the community, knowing who the community is.”

The narrative rings true to affirmations of a symbiotic relationship between tourism and sustainable development which has a transformative ability of influencing the manner in which people conduct their affairs. This narrative extends to one of the tourism industry’s primary objectives of the creation of a tourism economy aimed at the enhancement of the quality of life of the host communities (Uysal, Perdue & Sirgy, 2012: 105) through the creation of employment and other perceived economic, social and environmental benefits (Jeon, Kang & Desmarais, 2016).

Opportunities for local participation in development

The development of tourism in Nqileni village has brought with it a renewed sense of belonging to the local community. This has become evident in the manner in which the local community has been afforded opportunities to participate in activities related to the development of tourism within the village. For example, platforms for active participation are created where members of the community get to attend meetings and discuss matters of tourism development in the village. This is normally followed by a process of assignment of roles and tasks to member of the community with the customary remuneration to the participating individuals/families (depending on the availability of budgets). This is further articulated in narratives making reference to Bulungula lodge in terms of its ability to create employment opportunities and an environment conducive the establishment of small businesses, thereby enhancing the community’s ability to generate an income. The above is further substantiated by respondents’ dialogues stating the following:

“Yes, we are given a chance because we do get invited to platforms where we get to discuss matters that involve tourism development.”

“Indeed, members are given a role. Tourism is mostly beneficial to us as it is a driving force behind Nqileni village development. We have been knocking at the door of the government, but in vain.”

The above sentiments are congruent with proclamations of the NDP’s (2011) vision of providing South Africa’s rural areas with greater opportunities to participate fully in the economic, social and political life of the areas in which they live. This provides for the transformation of communities and also improves upon the quality of lives of natives (Abiona & Bello, 2013). While allowing for a meaningful involvement of such communities, not only for purposes of labour supply, but also entrepreneurial activities (South Africa. DEAT, 1996: 13).

Importance of involvement and role of members of the community in development

Development initiatives facilitate change in the area/community. For things to change for the better, development is needed. Therefore, it is important for members of the community to be involved in the development of the area. This is seen to be paramount because of development initiatives’ ability to promote a common purpose in an area said to be without government support. This further enunciated through the development and establishment of



the Bulungula lodge, which cemented the community's commitment to working together because of its role in the promotion and establishment of community development projects and income generating activities and endeavours within the area. Consequently, meaningful involvement of the community in development allows for self-sufficiency and sustainability, thereby decreasing dependency on government-based social welfare instruments (such as social grants). This is further accentuated in some short accounts as provided below:

"Community members are able to take initiative and also to work together at the lodge. We have a responsibility of working together, but we also wish to that the government can assist."

"It is important for the members of Nqileni to be involved because such programmes will help them, as well as future generations."

"It is important for members to involve themselves because there is income coming through and they members benefit."

"It is important for members of the community to be involved in the development of the community because such developments bring about change in the form of facilities such as clinics and schools, which we did not have in the past."

"That is the crown of everything. Without that, nothing can happen. If there's no participation then we're back the beggar situation where we just put hands out, and the handouts, and that to me is a no-no. It's a total participation of everybody, is so important."

The importance of members of the community participating in development initiatives is well documented in scholarly literature. This sees the above narratives concurring with works of authors like Onabanjo (2004) and Abiona and Bello (2013) and Nicolaidis (2015), all of which indicate the importance of mobilising and integrating locals in initiatives aimed at developing the areas in which they live, which eventually enables many communities to embark on activities aimed at transforming their environment into better developed settings (Onabanjo, 2004; Abiona & Bello, 2013). This is undertaken under the guide of an objective to achieve 'balanced use' with respect of the distribution of resources and enable tourism to engage and benefit all stakeholders through active involvement in the development (Budeanu, Miller, Moscardo & Ooi, 2016).

Community participation in decision-making

The importance of community involvement in decision-making related to development initiatives was highlighted to be crucial to respondents. The respondents indicated views that places the local community in the centre of decision-making as far as development is concerned. They advanced a narrative that is indicative of their view on the ownership of the land upon which the development initiatives are undertaken. The respondents further elucidated upon the importance of the provision of information to the community in order for them to make informed decisions and give proper input in development project within the area, which ultimately gives them a sense of things being done properly. As a result, the respondents view their participation in the decision-making process of development initiatives to be the best way to achieve the community's objectives of sustainable development, as this allows for transparency and the identification of the needs of the project which can be matched with the needs of the community. This further leads to community-based decisions, which can lead to minimal external influence or interference. These narratives are further emphasised through respondents' words in dialogues following:

"I think the community members should be involved, as this place belongs to the community."

"Yes, they should be involved. The ward councillor cannot do anything or make any decisions without involving the community members."

"Yes, they should be involved when decisions are taken because they are members of the community and decisions taken will affect them the most."

"Totally so. Totally so because I have had this experience in the previous village where I was working and I thought well I am the leader and I know what I should I do, and I just went ahead and did things because I had the understanding of it, unknowing that these people didn't know what I was doing and why I was doing it. And it brought a lot of unhappiness in the whole thing because they wanted to be



known in it and I didn't have the skills actually because my language is not that good, to actually bring this message over to them and thinking that they trust me to do it, whatever I do. I should have actually have had more...had them involved more in the planning and that shows very much so."

The above findings are in agreement with scholarly works of Nuttavuthisit, Jindahra and Prasarnphanich (2014) and also Nicolaides (2015), advocating for community participation in decision-making with regard to development initiatives because of its ability to promote improvement in efficiency, accountability, transparency in the utilisation of resources, enhance ownership and heighten commitment among local people to the development of tourism. Similarly, community participation in the taking and making of decisions in tourism development within their locality has the potential to empower the local community to engage tourism development with an active and responsible attitude as opposed to passivity often associated with development projects in developing countries, which will allow for the forging of new relations between communities and a destination, based on power sharing and equality (Dinham, 2005; Droga, & Gupta, 2012).

Recommendations

The study makes the following recommendations for effective practice:

- The participation of the Nqileni village community in development initiatives such as tourism is of paramount importance. It is recommended that the community leadership (government, traditional and business) encourage and enable the local community members to participate in tourism and other development activities to ensure endogenous development and minimise external control of development in the area.
- An empowered community is capable of implementing and managing development within the locality. It is recommended that the community be empowered and capacitated in key aspects of development particularly areas such as decision-making, planning and implementation of projects aimed at the sustainable development of Nqileni village and its people.
- Sustainable rural development requires that the local community is equipped with the requisite skills and expertise that will enable them to actively participate in development initiatives such as tourism. It is recommended that the community be afforded both formal and informal education and training that will allow them the ability to participate in implementation and management of tourism in the area. This will further ensure continued monitoring of tourism and its impacts on the society and environment.

Conclusion

Community participation in development initiatives within the locality has in recent times been a subject of much scholarly research. This has seen advocates of sustainable development turning the spotlight on the role of the local communities in development initiatives aimed at benefitting the local populace. Such efforts have consequently cemented a commitment of stakeholders to work together for the benefit of not only the economy, but the society and the environment as well.

The participation of members of the community in development initiatives such as tourism has been seen to be imperative in the eyes of the respondents as indeed is the case in numerous other studies globally. There is a consensus on the transformative ability of tourism in relation to opportunities that arise from development initiatives undertaken within the village. This is seen in the elucidations made in the findings stating narratives that saw a community that was neglected by the authorities rise from poverty to vibrancy and prosperity following the development of a community-based tourism initiative. Such a development saw community members become active participants and stakeholders in the decision-making, planning,



implementation and management of the development, thereby creating entrepreneurial concerns, employment opportunities and other positive social benefits for the community.

Finally, the intention of the study was not to claim research prowess on the importance of community participation in tourism development, but an attempt to provide a credible argument advocating for meaningful participation of the citizenry in development initiatives aimed to benefit the community. This advocacy is intended to encourage open dialogue relating to mechanisms that can allow for the enhancement of community participation in development initiatives such as tourism and encourage further research that will shed light on the phenomenon.

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