

Opportunities and Challenges of Community-Based Tourism Development in Southern Tigray, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study was conducted with the main objective of identifying the opportunities and challenges of Community-Based Tourism (CBT) development in Southern Tigray, Ethiopia. Eight potential tourist destinations were identified based on a set of a priori inclusion criteria. Primary data were collected from 153 households among residents of the potential sites, and key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. While residents' positive outlook towards tourism development and willingness to host tourists, fair availability of infrastructure, and rich eco-tourism potential were identified as the major opportunities for CBT development in the area, weak tourism marketing, limited accommodation facilities, and limited community awareness were identified as the major challenges. Despite the challenges contributing to the low level of CBT development, we show that the Southern Tigray is an area with a remarkable eco-tourism potential that could be exploited using a sustainable CBT model to the benefit of the local economy. Hence, stakeholders in the tourism development sector should work with local communities to utilize this untapped potential.

Keywords: Community based tourism, opportunities, challenges, Tigray, Ethiopia

Introduction

Tourism has emerged as a growing industry in many national economies, and the livelihood of an increasing proportion of the world's population is dependent upon the continuing viability of this sector. A report by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) indicates that international tourist arrivals hit a record 1.5 billion in 2019, showing an increase of 4% from the preceding year and sustained growth of 10 consecutive years since 2009 (UNWTO, 2020a). Tourism revenue earned by destinations



worldwide had grown to US\$ 1.7 trillion in 2018, registering a growth of more than 4% from the preceding year (UNWTO, 2019). This growth was made possible through advances in technology, visa facilitation and a growing middle-income class globally. Despite sustained tourism growth, figures for 2020 were significantly reduced due to the global health and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Reports from the UNWTO show a 65% drop in the number of international tourists in the first half of 2020 (UNWTO, 2020b). Ethiopia has rich historical, cultural and natural attraction sites and is also home to nine UNESCO-recognized world heritage sites (Ali, 2016; Wondemagegn, 2018). The availability of a plethora of attractions aside, tourism infrastructure and tourist products are poorly developed and maintained; access to tourist products is either difficult or expensive; and there is a lack of marketing to attract tourists (MoCT, 2016).

Nonetheless, tourism is becoming one of the most important sectors in Ethiopia that are contributing greatly to the country's social, cultural, and economic development (MoCT, 2016). According to a World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) report, Ethiopia's travel and tourism economy saw a growth of 48.6% in 2018, which was the highest globally (WTTC, 2019). Given the potential for tourism development and the challenges, the country is making efforts through its development programmes to enhance the role of tourism in the economy. A tourism development policy was introduced in 2009 to guide tourism sector development in Ethiopia and strengthen its role in the overall development and poverty reduction endeavours of the country (MoCT, 2009). The policy aims to promote broad-based community-based tourism with a large role of the local people in the development process. Furthermore, the policy encourages the identification of new tourist destinations and the establishment of pilot Community-Based Tourism (CBT) engaging local community members to work as local guides and tourism operators. The involvement of youth and women in CBTs through presenting local traditions and lifestyles, conserving natural and cultural resources, and other tourism service offering enterprises is also highly encouraged. The national ten-year master plan for sustainable tourism (2015-2025) targets tourism to achieve a 9% share in the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) by 2024 (MoCT, 2015). Despite a favourable policy environment, the CBT sector in Ethiopia is still found at a low level of development (Tamir, 2015; Tesfaye, 2017). This study mainly assesses the opportunities and major challenges of CBT development in Southern Tigray and forwards recommendations for sustainable community-based tourism development. The current state of tourism development and the perception of community members towards CBT development are also assessed.

Literature review

Tourism endowments of the Southern Zone of Tigray

The Southern Zone of Tigray in Ethiopia is known for its natural and cultural heritage and has rich biodiversity and wildlife. According to Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau (TCTB), the Southern Zone is classified as having rich, untapped natural and cultural heritage, and these are earmarked for tourism development in the area (TCTB, 2016). Forests like Higumbirda, which is classified under Dry Afromontane vegetation categories of Ethiopia, provide a dense forest composed of different indigenous plant species, and diverse habitats for plants and animals, including micro-organisms and birds. Administratively, the Southern Zone of Tigray hosts the Maichew tourism cluster, which is one of the five tourism clusters in the region. The Maichew tourism cluster in turn subsumes the Maichew and Korem-Ofila sub-clusters. The zone hosts potential tourist sites with significant cultural, religious, archaeological and natural resource features. Giorgis-Bolenta Church, according to oral history, was established ca. 750 years ago during the reign of Emperor Naod. It stands



surrounded by mostly Juniper trees in the middle of a hill on a circular plateau. It provides an ideal place for camping, with beautiful grassland surrounding the compound of the church. Walking along the perimeter of the church's compound presents an amazing scenery of mountain chains, escarpments, farmland and a far glimpse of the Great Rift Valley to the east. The Mifsas-Bahri Archaeological site is another potential tourist attraction located on the western shore of Lake Hashenge, along the Maichew-Korem highway. It came to the notice of authorities in 1997 due to an alleged excavation of building stones from the site by local residents. Full excavations were conducted by Mekelle University in 2014 and the team of Prof Paul Yule (Heidelberg) yielded ruins of structures with evidence of different construction layers, pottery and iron implements and stone artefacts (Wendrich, 2018). Holla Waterfalls are a series of falls along the Holla River, which begins its source around the mountains on the northeastern side of the town of Korem and flows through the valley on the eastern side of the town. The hill following the course of the river brings three consecutive waterfalls (Holla). Birds such as the Ethiopian endemic wattled ibis (*Bostrychia carunculata*), black stork (*Ciconia nigra*), hamerkop (*Scopus umbretta*), common sandpiper (*Actitis hypoleucos*), and Egyptian goose (*Alopochen aegyptiaca*) can be observed around the waterfalls and all along the course of the river. Another attraction of historical significance is the Emperor HaileSELLASIE's Bunker. This bunker is found on the outskirts of the town of Korem. It holds significant historical importance for hosting the Emperor and his crew before their final battle against the Italian forces during the second Ethio-Italy War (1935-1937). Other significant tourism potentials in the Zone include a war memorial museum holding remains of soldiers fallen during the Ethio-Italian War, hot water springs around the town of Alamata, and rich vegetation around the sites.

Theoretical framework

The community based tourism model

Tourism development endeavours need to be sustainable and viable while allowing for community participation without causing degradation of the environment (Pakshir & Nair, 2011). The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) defines Community Based Tourism (CBT) as a "tourism activity, community-owned and operated, and managed or coordinated at the community level that contributes to the well-being of communities through supporting sustainable livelihoods and protecting valued socio-cultural traditions and natural and cultural heritage resources" (ASEAN, 2015: 4). CBT emerged in response to negative consequences inherent in conventional tourism, such as the failure of local control of natural resources (Saayman & Giampiccoli, 2018). Mearns and Lukhele (2015) also state that CBT is a form of tourism that is gaining popularity, especially concerning the conservation and development of natural resources. They emphasize community empowerment and control and poverty reduction as benefits emerging from this community approach to tourism.

CBT activities are mainly initiated and run by a group of people willing to participate in such undertakings. Hence, before setting up a CBT programme in a rural area, community capacity building must be executed to ensure that they have enough understanding, capability and motivation to develop a CBT product, with sustainability in mind (Razzaq et al., 2012). In supporting the main pillars of sustainable tourism, Kayat (2014) identified five components as criteria for a sustainable CBT product. These include strong community involvement, empowerment and leadership, benefit to the community, collaboration and networking among relevant players, efficient marketing strategy, and conservation of a community's natural resources.



Cognizant of the contributions of CBT to development, ASEAN member states adopted CBT Standards to foster CBT development in member countries (ASEAN, 2015). These are based on a developing countries' context and aim to enhance benefits to households in such countries. Among others, it includes standards for effective and transparent governance, recognition of legitimate establishment, equitable sharing of benefits and costs, conserving of natural resources, maintaining cultural integrity, guest and local community interaction, local guide quality and expertise, accommodation quality, satisfying and safe experiences for tourists, and support for local economies.

Despite the benefits it renders to local communities, CBT development is not, however, without challenges. Various studies on the challenges of CBT development have been conducted in the context of developing countries. Tamir (2015) identified low quality of services and products and low cooperation among stakeholders as the main challenges for CBT development in Awi zone, Ethiopia. By analysing 13 research studies conducted in Ethiopia, Tesfaye (2017) concludes that the absence of basic ecotourism infrastructure and facilities, stakeholders' conflict of interests, shortage of trained manpower, low societal awareness, ineffective promotion and marketing, low public involvement and inadequate finance were the major challenges for community-based ecotourism in Ethiopia. On the other hand, an abundance of ecotourism resources and a favourable policy environment were identified as opportunities for CBT development in Ethiopia.

In a study conducted in Botswana, low levels of entrepreneurship, low community participation, poor marketing and management, and dependence on donors were identified as challenges to CBT development (Sebele, 2010). Mearns and Lukhele (2015) mention a low level of success of CBT initiatives in developing countries, which was attributed to a lack of clear national policies on CBT development. Moreover, they identified the management of CBTs at the operational level as the main challenge in Swaziland. Saayman and Giampiccoli (2018) identified implementation challenges, local capacity, and marketing and economic viability as key challenges in CBT development. Despite demonstrated benefits to communities and conservation of resources, many CBTs in developing countries fail to achieve their goals, mainly due to governance problems (Yanes et al., 2019). Juma and Vidra (2019) suggest that sound business practices and adequate technical and market linkage support can be used to overcome the challenges of CBT development and boost the success rates of CBTs in developing countries. Private sector involvement, proper stakeholder support, and effective monitoring and evaluation are also critical to the success and sustainability of CBTs (Armstrong, 2012). Active participation through capacity building and tailored training were also emphasized by Sebele (2010).

Resident perceptions: The social exchange theory

Despite a considerable body of empirical material in the field of resident reactions to tourism, theory in the field remains fragmented (Hunt & Stronza, 2014; Rasoolimanesh & Seyfi, 2021), and there is no comprehensive theory to guide research in the area (Hunt & Stronza, 2014; Monterrubio, 2008; Rua, 2020). The Irridex model, the Destination Lifecycle model, and the Social Exchange Theory (SET) are some of the dominant theories that are making a significant contribution to the field of resident perceptions in tourism (Hunt & Stronza, 2014; Petrić & Pivčević, 2016; Rasoolimanesh & Seyfi, 2021). The 'Irridex' model claims that local communities go through steps of reaction as tourism in their area becomes more profound and their attitude towards it shifts with experience (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Singh, 2011). The tourist area life-cycle model identifies a number of phases in the evolution of



tourism at a destination, including exploration, involvement, development, consolidation, stagnation and decline or rejuvenation (Rasoolimanesh & Seyfi, 2021; Singh, 2011).

The SET underpins most of the studies that focus on understanding the impacts of tourism on local communities and their lives (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016; Nunkoo, 2015; Petrić & Pivčević, 2016; Rasoolimanesh & Seyfi, 2021; Rua, 2020). Based on the social exchange theory, a local community remains supportive of a tourism initiative and is likely to positively participate in its sustainability if it perceives that a benefit is assured without incurring more costs (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Lee, 2012). On the other hand, the local community tends to oppose its development if it perceives that the costs will be more than the benefits (Bimonte & Punzo, 2016; Gursoy et al., 2002).

Besides its wide applicability in predicting and explaining attitudes toward tourists (Nunkoo, 2015; Tichaawa et al. 2021), the SET has the advantage of explaining resident reactions at the early stages of destination development, where uncertainty is also high (Diedrich & García-Buades, 2009; Hunt & Stronza, 2014). Hence, this theory underpins the analysis of resident perceptions in this research, as the study sites are found at early stages of development. Besides, the level of participation in economic activity within a community has been identified by many researchers as a determinant factor influencing if tourism will receive positive or negative attitudes from community members (Janusz et al., 2017; Nunkoo, 2015; Petrić & Pivčević, 2016). To account for this, this study employed consultative discussions with youth groups who were more likely to participate in tourism initiatives compared to other age groups.

Methodology

This study was based on the identification of tourist attraction sites that can be exploited in the form of community-based tourism. Hence, eight potential tourist destination sites were identified by taking into consideration the variety (array of activities available), quality and international marketability of the destination; accessibility, economic, social-cultural and environmental sustainability; awareness, hospitality, determination and assurance of local communities to visitors; and local authorities commitment to safeguarding the destinations, visitors and the business value-chain. These comprise some of the widely used criteria for tourism destination selection (Guo & Sun, 2016; Lim & McAleer, 2005; Luo, 2018). The eight potential destination sites identified in this study were the Georgis-Bolenta church and its environs in Endamokhoni district, Ethio-Italian war remains in the War Memorial Museum in Maichew, Saint Michel church, Mifsas-Bahri archaeological site, Lake Hashenge environ, historical caves and bunkers of the Ethio-Italian war, Holla waterfalls and the natural forest areas and community parks in Ofla district, and hot water springs in Alamata district. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were employed to collect qualitative data. Focus group discussions were conducted with individuals who were purposively selected based on their knowledge of the potential tourist destinations and their active role in community mobilization and participation. Thus, to gain community perspectives, the team conducted two focus group discussions, one in Maichew and another in Korem-Ofla sub-cluster. In each group, twelve (12) participants representing elders, religious leaders, women, youth, and local administration were involved. The FGD guide, among others, included discussion points on the potential benefits and costs of CBT, acceptance of CBT, and concerns and expectations of the local community.

The youth age group is a special interest group in this study because this age group is better involved in tour guiding and other related businesses, which makes it a direct beneficiary in such activities. To account for these special interests, a separate group



discussion involving twenty youth from Korem-Ofla and Maichew sub-clusters (ten from each sub-cluster) was also conducted. Key informant interviews were conducted with the head of the local tourism office and with an additional tourism development expert in each sub-cluster. In total, four key informants were reached for detailed interviews. The interview guide included detailed close and open-ended questions that were followed by probe-up questions by the interviewers. The interview, inter alia, included the status of local tourism, involvement of the local people, challenges encountered in tourism development, and tools of marketing and promotion used by the local tourism offices. Using Yamane (1967) formula for sample size determination and adjustment of 5% for error correction, a sample of 160 households was included in the survey. A formal household survey using a semi-structured questionnaire was conducted in the two sub-clusters (Maichew and Korem-Ofla) involving 80 households from each sub-cluster selected randomly from the villages adjacent to the identified tourist destinations. An equal number of respondents from the two districts (sub-clusters) is based on the assumption of proportional population sizes used by the regional administration to group villages into districts.

The survey among others included ratings of tourism supporting infrastructure and acceptance of new CBT openings and incoming tourists. In addition, respondents were inquired to list those local sites visited by tourists, potential CBT sites, major improvements and training needed, and expectations of benefits and concerns. In addition to primary data, secondary data that included local government reports, policy documents, publications and other relevant internet sources were used. Quantitative data were mainly used to assess the perception and awareness of the local people; whereas qualitative data were used to see the views and perspectives of key informants. Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data where the data were coded, categorized and analysed through frequency tables and percentages. Interpretative thematic analysis was applied to analyse the qualitative data, wherein, the patterns (themes) generated from key informant interviews and FGDs were identified and analysed. This study was conducted during the second half of 2018 (July-December, 2018). Whereas primary data were collected during this period, up-to-date figures for tourist inflows from the local tourism offices were absent due to poor database and recording systems.

Results

Tourist inflows

Fragmented secondary data obtained during data collection indicated that the Southern Zone of Tigray (also known as Maichew tourism cluster) is one of the least tourist recipient zones in the region (TCTB, 2016). Data for the period between July and December 2015, for example, showed that the cluster received only 528 international tourists (Table 1). This is the lowest compared to other tourism clusters in the region, namely, Aksum, Wukro, and Mekelle clusters, which had received 9,155, 11,862 and 6,426 tourists, respectively. The inflow of domestic tourists to Maichew tourism cluster during the same period was 20,107, a figure much smaller compared to Aksum, Wukro and Mekelle clusters (Table 1). Percentage-wise, the Maichew tourism cluster accounted for less than 8% of all domestic tourist flows in the Tigray region.

Table 1: Tourist inflow into the five tourism clusters in Tigray region (July to December 2015)

Tourism cluster	No. of international tourists	%	No. of domestic tourists	%
Wukro	11,862	41.6	166,879	64.8



Aksum	9,155	32.1	28,362	11.0
Mekelle	6,426	22.5	41,565	16.1
Maichew	528	1.8	20,107	7.8
Humera	550	1.9	722	0.3

(Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2016)

According to a nine-months performance report, covering the period between July 2017 and March 2018, a total of 8,690 domestic tourists visited the Korem-Ofla sub-cluster and a revenue of Ethiopian Birr (ETB) 986,400 (US\$ 1 = ETB 27.35 at the time of the study) was generated from the visitors (Korem-Ofla Tourism Coordination Office, 2018). In the same period, only 64 foreign tourists visited the sub-cluster which generated ETB 29,650. The average duration of stay per tourist for the district was about three days. According to a 2016/17 report, 3,750 domestic tourists visited the Maichew sub-cluster and generated a gross revenue of ETB 3,540,000 (Maichew Tourism Coordination Office, 2017). The number of foreign tourists who visited the Maichew sub-cluster was 375 and generated a gross revenue of ETB 2,774,772. The report also indicated that, during the same year, a total of 494 tourism-related jobs were created. We have found that the documentation of tourist information is not always consistent, which has made it difficult to do trend analysis based on time-series data.

Tourism infrastructure and services

We found the current road network, electricity, banking, telecommunications, housing, catering and water supply in the four cities (Maihyu, Korem, Alamata and Mekhoni) adequate to provide the most basic services for local and foreign tourists (Table 2). These are towns located so close to the selected destinations. The attractions in both Maichew and Korem-Ofla sub-clusters are accessible by car, pack animals (horse and mule), motor bike, bicycle, and even by foot. Public transport was also available to take visitors between the towns and near to the tourist destinations. *Hotels:* Generally, the hotels in the Southern Zone are able to provide only basic services to national and international tourists. According to a report from the TCTB, there were 18 hotels in Alamata, 9 in Maichew, 6 in Korem and 8 in Mekhoni in 2016 (TCTB, 2016). Restaurants, cafeterias and pensions were also found in varying numbers. *Water Supply:* The potential tourist accommodation sites located in the four towns in the Zone are equipped with a sufficient supply of clean water. *Transport:* The zone has a network of roads linking it with other well-established tourist destinations such as Axum, Artaale (Afar Region) and Lalibela (Amhara Region) via Mekelle city, Abeala and Weldiya towns, respectively. The existence of such inter-connection with different regions further opens opportunities not only as additional new major destinations, but also as stopover sites for tourists navigating between the attractions in Afar and Amhara Regions. It is important to note that the Maichew tourism cluster is located along the roads that connect these two regions. *Electricity:* While the major towns are supplied with 24 hours electricity and many of the hotels in the towns have back-up generators, the selected tourism destinations are not connected to any electric power systems at the moment. However, it is important to note that it is advisable to keep the destinations as "natural" as possible by using locally made light sources ('*Kuraz*', '*fanos*', '*tuaf*', '*masho*') and solar panels to light up the evenings. *Banking:* All the major towns in the zone have access to banking services, including forex exchange and ATM services. *Tour operators and Tourism Information Centres:* There were no tour operators or tourist information centres in the zone established to disseminate information about tourist attractions to tourists.

Table 2: Coverage of infrastructure and services in the Southern Zone of the Tigray Region (2015/16)



Infrastructure	%, No. or km
Road	
Asphalt and gravel road coverage	49.3%
Asphalt road	86 km
Gravel road	213 km
Road that connects district to Villages	27 km
Telecommunication	
Telephone	473
Wireless	13
Mobile phone	27, 265
Internet	71
Fax	43
Electricity	67%
Education	96%
Health	75%
Water supply	63%

(Source: Tigray Culture and Tourism Bureau, 2016)

Revenue/Income from tourism and jobs created

Data on jobs that were direct results of tourism were not available during the study period. The contribution of the tourism sector to income generation and livelihoods in the zone can rather be explained in terms of incomes generated by hotels, coffee houses and other small service delivery businesses. These, however, serve both tourists and non-tourists alike, making it difficult to see the separate contribution of the tourism sector to income and livelihoods in the zone. There were also no SMEs registered to perform tourism-specific activities. Involvement of the private sector in the tourism sector was also limited except for some investments in the hotel and hospitality industry, a notable one of which is the Raya Resort in Alamata district.

Promotion of tourist attractions

As indicated during the key informant interviews, efforts to promote the tourist attractions of the zone to domestic as well as international tourists were predominantly limited to the dissemination of brochures and posters prepared by the Culture and Tourism Offices of the Maichew and Korem-Ofla sub-clusters. The sub-clusters also use newspapers such as the Mekalih Tigray and documentary films produced by the local TV (Tigray Television) to promote the attractions. Furthermore, the office of tourism coordination in Korem-Ofla has rented air time from the local radio broadcasting (Dimtsi Weyane) as part of its attempts to promote tourism in the area. None of the sub-clusters run websites or had any other social media platform to promote tourist attraction sites to potential domestic as well as international tourists. In addition, there were no tour operators in the clusters who could do the job of promotion.

Household survey results

A household survey including 153 respondents was completed, of which 80 were from Korem-Ofla sub-cluster and 73 from Maichew sub-cluster. Gender wise, 101 were men and the rest 52 women. The average age of the respondents was 42 years (range: 20-83 years). People from all age groups were included to see the views and levels of understanding of the respondents towards tourism. The education levels of the respondents were found to be generally low, with around 41% having only completed primary school. Moreover, around 46% were unable to read or write. Only 12% were found to have reached secondary school levels. The livelihood of a large majority of the respondents (around 86%) in both sub-clusters depends on rain-fed farming, a combination of crop production and livestock



husbandry. The contribution of other livelihood sources, such as petty trade and wage labour was negligible.

Infrastructural development and services: The respondents were asked to rate infrastructural development and services based on a scale of One to Five (1-5), where '1' represents very good/high access and '5' represents very poor/low access. Accordingly, access to telecom was rated as relatively high (88.3%); whereas access to electricity was rated as the lowest (67.1%). Moreover, banking, health services, roads and schools were rated moderately accessible. When the respondents were asked to prioritize the major improvements needed to develop the selected sites as potential tourist destinations in both Korem-Ofla and Maichew sub-clusters, the major interventions they suggested include road, electricity, accommodation, and potable water development (Table 3). Besides, plantation and improvement of landscape (landscape management) were among the interventions suggested in Maichew sub-cluster. Asphalt and gravel road coverage (49.3%), electricity (67%), and water supply (63%) are found at relatively lower stages of development in the Zone.

Table 3: Suggested priority interventions to further develop the proposed tourism destinations

Suggested interventions	Korem-Ofla (%)	Maichew (%)
Road improvement	35.4	20.5
Electricity	16.5	20.5
Building accommodation (lodges, hotels, guest houses, etc.)	13.6	12.3
Potable water	6.3	6.8
Improvement of recreational facilities	5.1	-
Plantation and improvement of landscape	2.5	13.7
Maintaining good relationship between tourists and local communities	3.8	8.2

Tourism awareness and acceptance: Asked if there are commonly visited tourist attractions in their area, around 80% of the respondents said there are such sites in their area (Table 4). Accordingly, the commonly cited attractions include the Giorgis-Bolenta Monastery, Gabir Church, natural mountainous landscapes and historical battlefields in Maichew, waterfalls (such as Holla Kelebet waterfall), Lake Hashenge, Mifsas-Bahri archaeological site and natural forest reserve (such as Hugumbirda State Forest) in Korem-Ofla. Inquired further, if there were additional sites that could potentially serve as tourist destinations, about 30% of the respondents suggested other natural attractions that could potentially be developed as suitable tourist destinations.

Table 4: Knowledge of local residents on visiting tourists and tourism destinations in their area

Item	Responses (%)		
	Yes	No	Don't Know
Are there areas commonly visited by tourists in your area?	80.4	9.2	10.5
Are there additional potential tourist destinations in your area?	29.4	35.3	35.3
Are the tourists mainly international (foreigners)?	44.4	47.7	7.9
Do you visit the tourist attractions in your locality?	58.0	42.0	

Asked if the most frequent tourists visiting the destinations were international, around 44% of them responded positively, and about 48% responded against. It is assumed that such approximate figures were mainly due to a lack of awareness by the respondents in actually understanding who the tourist is. Many had the perception that a tourist is someone who is a foreigner (*Ferenji* in the local language), and this might have impacted their responses by excluding domestic visitors as tourists. About 42% of the respondents had never visited the



sites around their localities, and those who visited the sites regularly were mere as part of their daily routine to and from their workplaces.

Cultural and religious events: Respondents were also asked about cultural and religious events conducted in their community that may be of interest to tourists (Table 5). In both Maichew and Korem-Ofla, the top four events were the Epiphany, *Nigsi* (annual or biannual religious festivity celebrated by a church community, neighbouring communities and guests), *Ashenda* (traditional carnival conducted by girls held from August 22 to 24 each year) and *Meskel* (finding of the true cross held on September 27 & 28 annually), in the order of popularity of the events. These cultural events are conducted in a very traditional and religious manner, gathering a large mass of people of different ages, gender and religious backgrounds and celebrated colourfully in public places and religious sites. During such events, there are various displays of traditional clothing, hairstyles, music and dancing, and various cultural food and drinks.

Table 5: Cultural and religious events conducted on a regular basis

Events	Korem-Ofla (%)	Maichew (%)
<i>Timket</i> (Epiphany) - January 19-20	59.7	39.1
<i>Nigsi</i> (celebration of Saints Day in their localities)	23.4	34.8
<i>Ashenda</i> (a carnival style traditional singing and dancing festivity celebrated predominantly by girls in huge numbers in public places - August 22-24)	5.2	11.6
<i>Meskel</i> (celebration of the finding of the true cross - September 27-28)	2.6	2.9

Opinion on the start or opening of new tourism destinations and relationships with tourists: Respondents were asked to rate their responses on the opening of a new destination. Accordingly, the response from 71.2% of respondents was 'very glad'; while 25.5% of the respondents say they are 'glad' about this issue. Only 1.3% are not interested, and 2% of the respondents are with no opinion. This suggests that the local community is receptive to the idea of introducing new tourism destinations in their localities. In connection with this opinion, a large majority of the respondents (97.4%) were also expected to establish positive relationships with incoming tourists (Table 6). Besides, the positive outlook towards the opening of new tourism destinations and tourists *per se*, a large majority of respondents (~92%) also expected that tourism would open various frontiers for socio-economic benefits (Table 6). The main benefits, according to the respondents, could come from the opening of small businesses, including the sales of food items, related services and sales of handicrafts. Employment opportunities in the tourism sector and music and dance shows at various events were also mentioned in their rank of importance. Other expected benefits include tour guide services, income from renting pack animals and income from renting homestays.

As also disclosed during the FGDs, many of the villagers, despite their low levels of awareness, were receptive to the idea of community-based tourism initiatives in their villages. The idea of a CBT initiative was positively accepted by the villagers for its potential benefits in bringing about business opportunities. As seen during the FGDs, there was a high expectation that such initiatives could give rise to new petty trade activities in the form of sales of cultural artefacts (that include *Tilfi*, *Sife*, *Gofla*, *Sefie*, and *Agelgil*), milk and milk products and traditional drink and dishes. Other potential income sources include cultural plays and traditional beauty treatments (*Tush*). The respondents were also asked if they expect challenges following the introduction of CBT initiatives. Hence, around 41% of them have concerns that tourism might negatively affect their livelihoods. Loss of farmland for tourism-related investments (55%) and cultural invasion (36%) was mentioned as the major concerns (Table 6). Other concerns include theft, organized crime and environmental



degradation. FGD participants also inquired if CBTs require the expropriation of their farmlands, again indicating the concern of the community about this land issue. Concerns regarding cultural differences in the eating habits of tourists were also raised during the FGDs.

Table 6: Respondent expectations on opportunities and challenges

Item	Response	%
Do you expect good relationships with incoming tourists?	Yes	97.4
	No	2.0
Do you expect benefits from tourism development?	Yes	90.2
	No	7.8
Do you foresee any challenge that might develop due to tourism development in your locality?	Yes	41.2
	No	58.8

Training needs of local people: In connection to this, the respondents have mentioned tourist handling and hospitality, community awareness about tourism, catering and food preparation and tourism marketing and business as the primary training needs that are required to further enhance CBT in their area (Table 7). Note that while tourist handling and hospitality were the priority training needs in Korem-Ofla, it was community awareness creation in Maichew.

Table 7: Training needs

Priority intervention	Korem-Ofla (%)	Maichew (%)
Tourist handling and hospitality	40.6	25.9
Community awareness creation	23.4	33.3
Catering skills, food preparation	14.1	13.0
Tourism marketing and business	12.5	5.6
Tour guide operation	0	3.7

Besides, according to the key informant interviews, extensive training to youth in the area of tour guide, community-based tourism management, map reading, GPS usage, hiking techniques, tourist handling and management, ethics, international languages (e.g. English) and other relevant on-the-job trainings were suggested. Moreover, additional trainings addressing households interested in running a home-stay and camping business and better understanding of local cultural values and customs (dressing, hair styles, food and drink preparation, and community and religious holidays) were recommended.

Discussion

This study has adopted the SET, which views acceptance as an exchange of gains and losses (Rasoolimanesh & Seyfi, 2021; Rua, 2020), to analyze resident perceptions of CBT. Resident perception, however, is a result of multiple factors that include the stage of tourism development, availability of services and infrastructure, level of interaction between tourists and residents, personal values, environmental awareness, level of knowledge and skills owned by residents, and other relevant factors (Rasoolimanesh & Sey, 2021; Rua, 2020). Resident perceptions are usually dynamic, as are challenges and opportunities, which vary depending on various contexts and tourism development stages. However, in this study, a one-time assessment has been adopted. Hence, an assessment of future resident perceptions in the study area may call for combining the SET with other lifecycle-based theories of residents' perceptions. Subsequent paragraphs discuss the challenges, opportunities and factors affecting resident perceptions in the study area.

Status of tourism: Despite the abundant presence of natural and cultural tourist attractions in the Southern Zone of Tigray, data regarding tourist inflows show that tourism development in the Southern Zone is in its infancy, and the direct livelihood contribution of



the tourism sector to the local economy remains minimal (TCTB, 2016). As disclosed during the survey, community consultations, and key informant interviews, lack of standard accommodation for tourists and proper marketing and promotion of destinations remain the significant obstacles to tourism development in the area. Secondary sources also identified poor service quality, damage to and management problems of cultural and religious heritages, and poor institutional support as the key challenges (Maichew Tourism Coordination Office, 2017). Thus, tourism in the study area so far has been informal, unorganized, and done haphazardly. This low level of tourism development is likely to have a positive impact on residents' acceptance of tourism, whereas, at the initial stages, local communities are less likely to see the negative impacts of tourism.

Promotion/marketing: An efficient marketing strategy is vital to promote tourism endowments to potential visitors (Kayat, 2014). Promotion of tourism attraction sites in the study area to potential domestic as well as international tourists, however, was minimal. Promotion made so far was done solely by the respective government agency, the Culture and Tourism Office, which was neither adequately staffed nor budgeted. The distribution of brochures and posters by the local tourism offices was not enough to reach the target group, especially international visitors. Information centres could also be vital sources in the provision of information to visitors, but there were none to be found in the Southern Tigray. There were also no active tour guides operating in the area. Despite the importance of networking and collaboration with relevant actors in the tourism sector (Pansiri, 2013), the activities of the Culture and Tourism Office in Southern Tigray were marked with limited networking, especially with important tour guiding actors in Mekelle and Addis Ababa. As a result, most of the destinations in the Southern Zone are less known today to tourists and tour operators.

Infrastructure and Services: Tourism supporting infrastructure and services in the form of telecom, water, electricity, health centres and roads are vital to tourism development and have the potential to determine success rates (Tamir, 2015; Tesfaye, 2017). It was seen that transport and telecommunication infrastructure coverage in the study area is fair enough to initiate tourism activities. Moreover, electricity and water supply coverage are adequate in nearby towns, though much lower coverage was seen in the potential CBT sites. The presence of nearby police stations and local markets for fresh products around the attractions was also seen as an advantage to tourism development in the area. The availability of an airport in Mekelle with several flights per day, at a 120 km distance from Maichew, is also considered a plus for tourism development in the zone.

Accommodation: Accommodation and hotel availability in nearby towns and cities remains key to tourist inflows (Attila, 2016), and without adequate and up to the standard accommodation, attracting visitors to tourist attraction sites might be difficult. As indicated earlier, the number of standard accommodations that could fit the demands of tourists is very low in the nearby towns of Alamata, Maichew, Korem and Mekhoni, and this can harm tourism in the Southern Zone. The absence of facilities such as lodges and hotels in nearby towns and around the sites could hinder adequated tourist flows. The availability of accommodation, however, should not be seen as a substitution for CBT endeavours that are run and managed by the communities themselves, but as a facilitator and entry point to CBT initiatives.

Community Awareness: The awareness of local people towards tourism activities will have a profound impact on the benefits accruing to these people and the continued development of the tourism sector. Petrić and Pivčević (2016) emphasize the need for raising the awareness of communities, in a bid to fight negative impacts and perceptions. They



suggest resident involvement in the planning and management of CBTs if a sustainable approach to tourism development is to be pursued. Community awareness regarding tourism remains at relatively low levels in the study sites, as evidenced by the lack of knowledge of tourism activities, limited identification of attraction sites and tourism potentials, and low visitation to nearby attraction centres. Therefore, programmes aimed at boosting the awareness of tourism businesses and tourists are mandatory to fully exploit the benefits the sector provides. Community awareness concerning maintaining a clean environment and keeping the safety of potential tourists is also an area that deserves attention in the sites.

Community acceptance: Local participation and acceptance in tourism development are necessary to bring about desired outcomes in community development (Blackstock, 2005; Tichaawa & Mhlanga, 2015; Nunkoo et al., 2019); and a lack of this could result in negative impacts. Mearns and Lukhele (2015) also suggest that community involvement and empowerment and their participation in the leadership of CBT initiatives remain important for it to be accepted among a community. The benefit to society is also underscored as an important instrument of keeping communities supportive of a CBT initiative (Sebele, 2010). This particular research has revealed that there was a strong positive opinion towards tourism by the villagers, provided that tourists respect the local culture and law. Moreover, tourism must be done in a way that uplifts the local people economically, environmentally and culturally for it to get the continued acceptance of the local people. This strong positive opinion is evidenced by positive expectations of economic benefits, friendly attitudes towards tourists, and acceptance of new tourism initiatives. The consultative discussion made separately with the youth to assess their acceptance and expectations, also reveals similar results of high acceptance and expectations of economic gains from CBT undertakings.

For tourism to remain sustainable and beneficial to a local community, the conservation of community natural resources is important (Kayat, 2014). Tourist attraction sites like Lake Hashenge and Mifsas-Bahri archaeological sites are located around private land possessions, and this poses a challenge to the conservation of the endowments and construction of lodges and other facilities around the sites. The absence of a buffer zone between the tourist attraction sites and private land holdings also poses a challenge for an expansion of archaeological exploration around Mifsas-Bahri. The land around Lake Hashenge is currently being extensively used for grazing by the surrounding community, and any land relocation attempts could be met with protests. Besides, it was indicated that some sort of fear of land expropriation runs deep among local communities.

Despite positive feedback from residents, the reaction could change when tourists start to flow into the sites and camp there in relatively large numbers. The actual reaction could depend on the size, demand and behaviour of future tourists. As also disclosed in the SET, actual responses to CBT would depend on any future benefits gained, impacts on the environment, and influences on cultural and social values. The idea of community acceptance here should be seen as a dynamic interaction between residents and the benefits generated at various stages of tourism (development), rather than a mere static relationship between the two. It must also be noted that the high enthusiasm towards tourism observed during the survey is based on limited encounters with tourists and gains accrued so far. For communities to remain supportive of tourism activities, tourism in the sites must be able to generate sustainable benefits economically, socially and environmentally.

Training and capacity building: To overcome the capacity challenges of local communities, training tailored to their gaps is critical to the success of CBTs (Tamir, 2015). Aref and Redzuan (2009) also emphasize the need for community capacity building together with tourism development endeavours. Hence, the capacity of service delivering



institutions and awareness of the community at large needs to be enhanced through training, forums and related engagements before tourists are invited into the attractions. Communication skills and documented descriptions of CBT products are also mandatory for proper tour guiding activities. In connection to this, key informant interviews have revealed that there was no extensive inventory of tourist attractions, and research-based documentation was lacking. Capacity building programmes hence need to consider documentation and proper communication skills as important aspects of CBT development in the study area.

Conclusion

This study is different from others in that it focuses specifically on the opportunities and challenges of developing CBT, in contrast to studies that looked at ongoing community-based tourism projects in Ethiopia. The study found that insufficient marketing and promotion, poor public awareness and local initiatives, and poor-quality tourist services as major challenges for CBT development in the study area. The availability of rich ecotourism potential (in terms of nature, landscape, culture, history and archaeology) in the area was identified as a significant opportunity for CBT development. The empirical evidence also shows a strong interest among households and community leaders in CBT, which suggests that they have a positive attitude towards it.

On the practical side, the study has shown that future CBT development efforts in the study area should focus on exploiting the opportunities that have been identified, while also addressing the challenges. The main theoretical contribution of the study lies in the fact that all of the sites considered are only potential CBT sites, with limited or no CBT activities so far. As a result, operational-level CBT challenges were not visible in this study. Moreover, as the selected sites are only potential CBT destinations, local residents' perceptions of the CBTs could change by the time they are actually implemented. This calls for the adoption of lifecycle based tourism theories, in addition to the SET, in order to investigate future changes in resident perceptions.

The zonal tourism office should adopt modern IT technologies to extensively promote the destinations. This would include using websites and various social media platforms. The existence of strong and legally established CBTs, with clear bylaws and support from the communities, is important for ensuring the benefits these initiatives provide to communities are realized. To keep communities supportive of tourism initiatives, the primary beneficiaries must be the people living in the community. This can be accomplished through creating employment opportunities, helping small businesses thrive, and improving the everyday lives of residents. The development of CBTs requires continued capacity building and training, including in hospitality, handcraft, and artwork. Community-based awareness-raising programmes are essential for the tourism sector, and CBT interventions will be successful if the public has a changed perception and understanding of tourism.

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