



# Benefits of sustainable rural tourism: a case of Nqileni village, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa

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## Abstract

The development of tourism has been heralded to bring to host communities benefits often deemed to alleviate poverty and reduce vulnerability in rural areas in the world. This has resulted in governments taking a keen interest in the development of tourism with the core focus being placed on the sector's ability to contribute to economic development, thereby delivering on the mandate of improving the lives of the citizenry. Such efforts have been seen to go beyond economic benefits and extend into the concerted search for solutions aimed at redressing the effects of ecological and social crises resulting from massive exploitation of resources and the continuous degradation of the environment (social and physical). This relates to a definition widely promulgated following the Brundtland Commission (1987), namely that, 'development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs'. The study analysed the benefits of sustainable tourism in rural communities both tangible and intangible in Nqileni village, Eastern Cape Province, South Africa. This was undertaken using a qualitative research approach using semi-structured interviews to solicit data from twenty five members of the Nqileni village community in their different capacities within the community. The data was analysed using the NVivo system, version 11. The study found that community members felt that sustainable tourism was creating benefits of socio-economic in nature and integrity of place.

**Keywords:** Sustainability, rural development, tourism, benefits, Eastern Cape Province

## Introduction

The toil associated with defining the concept of sustainability was lightened by Mowforth and Munt (2009: 43) in their attempt to shed light on the matter, stating that it is world development that is not negative to the economy, society and environment. Carley and Christie (2000: 142) further assert sustainable development to be a new type of economic development in opposition to the development paradigm of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (profit above society and environment), and consistent with the protection, conservation and preservation of the environment for future generations. This has been evident in a vision provided by Inskeep (1994: 21) who emphasised the significance of managing resources with the aim to fulfil economic, social and aesthetic needs, while maintaining cultural integrity and biological diversity. Additionally, the paradigm of sustainability requires a holistic and systematic approach that will enable interventions (such as conservation of resources and capacity building) that are integrated and take into consideration the complex and dynamic interactions of the economy, environment, society and culture that have been seen to engulf the development process, thus requiring the



concept of sustainability to be multidimensional in nature (Pulido-Fernandez, Andrades-Caldito & Sanchez-Rivero, 2015; Sharpley, 2009: 25).

The concept of sustainability gained prominence as a result of the United Nations Conference on Environmental Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, which concluded with the design of a programme aimed at promoting sustainable development throughout the world, known as Agenda 21, which was aimed at laying out the basic principles required for the world towards a sustainable future (Evans, Joas, Sundback & Theoblad, 2013: 26). This plan advocated for countries to involve local communities in their development, thereby fostering a 'bottom up' approach, in opposition to a 'top-down approach' that often characterises national development plans (Barrett, Brandon, Gibson & Gjertsen, 2001). Accordingly, sustainable development should undertake to encourage a participatory approach that allows for the government, industry, tourists and host communities to work together towards a common goal (Simpson, 2008). This can be achieved through adhering to the principles of sustainable development promulgated by Telfer & Sharpley (2015: 35) as follows:

- Holistic perspective: development that is inclusive of all spheres of the environment aimed at addressing global challenges of sustainability;
- Futurity: development that places great emphasis on the long-term future; and
- Equity: development aimed at fair and equitable utilisation of resources within and between generations.

The foundation of sustainable development was initially embedded in the pursuit of preserving environmental quality, which was further extended over to the quality of life of people living within the environment - inclusive of the complexities such as economic and social aspects (Gladwin, Kennelly & Krause, 1995). This is further asserted in a study conducted by Kates, Parris and Leiserowitz (2005) who observed that the aims of sustainable development, which include placing priority on basic human needs, economic growth, equity to share resources with the poor, and the encouragement of effective citizen participation. In addition, this form of development emboldens a long-term perspective on the utilisation of finite resources (Amir, Ghapar, Jamal & Ahmad, 2015; Hall & Lew, 2009). The development of tourism utilises the finite resources mentioned above and requires the same principles of sustainability.

### **Sustainable tourism**

A myriad of attempts, both intellectual and practical, have been undertaken to formulate a genuinely sustainable approach to tourism. (Sharpley, 2009: 35). This has seen such approaches being considered ideal for development, especially in developing countries. However, this is challenged by a lack of consensus in relation to an acceptable meaning of the concept of sustainable development, together with the extent to which it differs from other development concepts (Cobbinah, Erdiaw-Kwasie & Amaoteng, 2015). This has seen policy makers being influenced by poorly theorised concepts that eventually led to the misguided application of policies, advocating notions such as 'green' tourism and 'ecotourism', which have peppered literature in recent times (Bishop, 2014).

It is important to note that advocates of sustainable development research have toiled relentlessly to bring the concept to reality in developing countries, by employing activities of global institutions such as the United Nations Environmental Programme, and conferences including the '2012 Rio 20' conference in Brazil (Cobbinah et al., 2015). Such efforts stem from the problems associated with global instability, requiring solutions that can be advanced through phenomena (such as tourism) capable of developing positive economic, social and environmental returns for the betterment of world, especially the developing world



(Gabdrakhmanov, Rubtzov, Baybakov, Somaeh & Nugaev, 2016). Bishop (2014) further points out the paradox of reconciling the effects of a notoriously unstable and consumptive industry (tourism) with imperatives of stimulating development in a genuinely sustainable fashion.

### **The practice of sustainable tourism development**

The definition of sustainable tourism development stems from debates following the “Our Common Future” legacy, which began in the early 1990s. This prompted authors like Inskeep (1991: 43) to define five main criteria for sustainable tourism, which include the addressing of economic, environmental and social responsibilities of tourism as well as visitor satisfaction and global justice and equity (Mihalic, 2016 citing Inskeep, 1991: 43). The same author further elaborates on the support given to the three pillar (environmental, socio-cultural and economic) concept of sustainable tourism by organisations such as the United Nations World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), which later became the focus of academic literature and programmes, while substantially contributing to many tourism strategies and policies, and eventually resulting in a global trend towards sustainable tourism development (Mihalic, 2016).

The development of tourism requires a concerted effort on the part of all stakeholders to be implemented in line with sustainable strategies, while ensuring equal distribution of social, environmental and economic benefits to the host communities (Li & Wan, 2013; Jeon, Kang & Desmarais, 2016). This is seen to be in line with the tenets of sustainable development that aim to balance the protection of nature from human incursion and the consumption of natural resources for the satisfaction of human needs (Aall, 2014). Such endeavours involve the recognition of the possible adverse effect of tourism on the environment, the society and the economy and the need to manage these effects with the aim of achieving the ultimate goal of sustainable development, which entails the maximisation of positive outcomes of tourism on the three pillars of sustainable tourism, while minimising the negatives (Saarinen, 2006).

### **Benefits of sustainability in tourism**

The discourse of sustainable tourism rests upon the proper management of host community resources, with the aim of meeting the fundamental criteria of promoting socio-economic wellbeing and livelihood of the local community, without compromising the satisfaction of the needs of the tourists (Malik & Bhat, 2015). This is evident in the assertion of Angelevska-Najdeska and Rakicevik (2012), stating that sustainable tourism development involves an equally balanced development, that takes into account the economic, social and cultural aspects, without unacceptable effects and endangerment of the physical environment upon which it is based. This practice will ensure that the integrity of the destination remains intact with all stakeholders left satisfied by the development.

### **Integrity of place**

According to Angelkova, Koteski, Jakovlev and Mitrevska (2012), the support afforded by tourism to the destination in highlighting the local character, such as architecture, traditional cuisine, heritage, aesthetic values and ecology, allows for the enhancement of the integrity of place, which is integral to the travellers’ understanding of the area visited and subsequent respect for place and its environments. This is further supported by assertions of Jeon et al. (2016) indicating the contribution of tourism to the sustainability of the local environment through the accrual of benefits of both improvement of local infrastructure and the protection the physical environment. This is undertaken under the guide of an objective to achieve ‘balanced use’ with respect to the distribution of resources, and enables tourism to engage and also benefits all stakeholders at the same time (Budeanu, Miller, Moscardo & Ooi,



2016). The returns of such endeavours and earnings from tourist activities and spending allow for increased local experience of activities happening within their habitat and great beneficiation to the host community in terms of the positive multiplier effects that often come with the needs of tourist establishments of a local workforce, supplies and services.

### **Socioeconomic benefits of sustainability in tourism**

*“Sustainable tourism maintains resources, respects local culture, weighs the quality and not quantity, translates to exceptional travel for tourists and satisfies both customers and locals” (Angelkova, Koteski, Jakovlev & Mitrevska, 2012: 224).*

According to Aall (2014), the relationship between tourism and sustainable development is embedded in the belief of tourism’s ability to promote sustainable development that goes beyond reducing negative environmental impacts of tourism. This is further affirmed by Budeanu, Miller, Moscardo and Ooi’s (2016) perception of tourism’s transformative ability of influencing the manner in which people around the world think about the Earth as a global community. This narrative extends to one of the tourism industry’s primary objectives - 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 benefits (Jeon *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, efforts made to sustain development initiatives such as tourism allow for the host communities to adopt or learn new ways of living that often translate into conscious and environmentally friendly consumption habits including the conservation of natural resources for the benefit of both the host community and tourists alike (Aall, 2014). The author further points to tourism’s potential for being a powerful social force that is capable of achieving many more ends that are important. Quoting Higgins-Desboilles (2006: 1192), tourism has “the capacities that are unfettered from the market fundamentalism of neoliberalism and instead are harnessed to meet human development imperatives and the wider public good”. This can be made possible through the development and acquisition of the requisite capacity to enable for a sustainable development of tourism.

### **Methodology**

The study employed a qualitative research approach coupled with an in-depth exploratory examination of community participation in the development of rural areas through tourism, particularly Nqileni village. This relied on semi-structured interviews using a non-probability purposive sampling technique to collect the empirical data required.

The focus of the study was on Nqileni village, which houses the Bulungula Lodge, a tourism project owned and managed by the community. This project is a community-based tourism enterprise aimed at the development of the Nqileni community with initiatives in education, health and infrastructure (Bulungula, 2015). The sample was chosen based on the respondents’ close proximity to activities and developments associated with tourism within the village. The sample comprised of the following community leadership stakeholders with the aim of ensuring that the voice of the community is listened to and heard.

### **Results and discussion of the study**

This section provides the findings of the study and it provides details of who were the respondents and what role they play in the tourism industry.

### **Demographics of the respondents**

The study undertook to engage respondents of Nqileni village using semi-structured interview schedules. This was under the categories placing respondents in accordance with



the role they play in the community in relation to tourism. The following tables provide an illustration of the range in which the study attempted to cover every avenue of the community of Nqileni village. Tables 1.1 and 1.2 presents the demographics of the respondents in relation to their roles in the tourism industry in the study area.

**Table 1.1 Demographics of the community leadership**

Respondents'	Age	Residence	Length of residence	Role
3	Estimated age- 30-39	Nqileni	Whole life	Ward Committee member
1	Estimated age- 50-59	Nqileni	Whole life	Headman
6	Estimated age- 40-49	Nqileni	Whole life	Ward councillor
7	Estimated age- 30-39	Nqileni	Whole life	Manager- Bulungula Lodge
25	Estimated age- 30-39	Dutywa	Since 2007	Local Economic Development Officer for Mbashe Local Municipality

**Table 1.2 Demographics of the general population of Nqileni village**

Respondents'	Age	Residence	Length of residence	Role
2	Estimated age- 40-49	Nqileni	Unknown	Unemployed
4	Estimated age- 20-29	Bulungula	Whole life	Canoeing
5	Estimated age- 50-59	Nqileni	Whole life	Unemployed
8	Estimated age - 40-49	Bulungula	Whole life	Help in the kitchen
9	Estimated age- 40-49	Nqileni	Whole life	Unemployed
10	Estimated age- 30-39	Nqileni	Whole life	Unemployed
11	Estimated age- 30-39	Nqileni	Whole life	Employee of Bulungula lodge (horseback riding guide)
12	Estimated age- 20-29	Nqileni village	Whole life	Manager
13	Estimated age- 30-39	Nqileni village	25 Years	Cleaner
14	Estimated age- 40-49	Nqileni village	6 Years	Chef
15	Estimated age- 40-49	Nqileni village	Whole Life	Help in the kitchen
16	Estimated age- 30-39	Nqileni village	Whole life	Security guard during the day
17	Estimated age- 60+	Nqileni	Since 2008	Unemployed
18	Estimated age- 50-59	Xhora,	Since 1979	Unemployed
19	Estimated age- 20-29	Nqileni village – sea-side	1 year	Legal Advisor



Respondents'	Age	Residence	Length of residence	Role
20	Estimated age- 20-29	Nqileni village	Since 1991	Receptionist
22	Estimated age- 20-29	Nqileni	25 years	Entrepreneur- owner and manager of Ilanga Fire restaurant
23	Estimated age- 20-29	Nqileni	Since 2010	Tour guide
	Estimated age- 50-59	Nqileni village	Whole life	Security guard

A common narrative amongst the community of Nqileni village in relation to rural and community development centred on the development of infrastructure, resources and people; tourist attractions; and the Bulungula lodge. This brought forth a narrative that described development to entail access to basic services such as water and electricity as well as proper roads and infrastructure, with the development of people and the Bulungula lodge also being a key constituent. The lodge was constantly credited with a number of developments (such as the availability of running water, solar panels and a proper road connecting the village with other areas). Additional narratives on eradication of poverty and the sustainable realisation of self-reliance and self-sufficiency were also brought forward. These have been consistent oratory amongst respondents and are presented as follows:

*"I think it would refer to people being developed and having access to water and electricity and proper roads."* (Respondent 12)

*"Before the establishment of lodge we did not have infrastructure such as proper roads, running water and solar panel. The lodge has now made these developments possible."* (Respondent 3)

*"The first thing I can think of is the establishment of the lodge as it has brought about change in our lives. Before the lodge, we did not have jobs, but now there is something that we are getting, as small as it is."* (Respondent 6)

The understanding of development by the general community of Nqileni village is given credence by assertions of Jeon et al. (2016) indicating the contribution of tourism to the development and sustainability of the local environment through the accrual of benefits of both improvement of local infrastructure, the protection the physical environment and the enhancement of economic prosperity of the people. This is also seen to be in agreement with the prescripts of the NDP (2011) in relation to the provision of basic services that enable people to develop the capabilities they need to take advantage of economic opportunities throughout the country and contribute to the development of their communities through remittances and the transfer of skills.

### **Strategic role of tourism in the development of Nqileni village**

According to the Bulungula Incubator website (2015), the establishment of the Bulungula lodge, and the subsequent development of tourism in Nqileni village, has spurred initiatives that saw a community rise from the scourge of poverty and hopelessness, to vibrancy and prosperity. This has seen tourism being the nucleus of development in initiatives such as early childhood development and education, health care, food security, clean water and electricity, small business development, and infrastructure development within the area.



## **Tourism's role in the sustainable satisfaction of community needs and the fight against uncertainty**

The findings indicate that respondents see tourism as able to promote sustainable development in the area. This is evident in the narratives that places tourism development in the centre of the development of the community and the area, in lieu of government support. This is further confirmed by respondents' citing tourism development to have been the driving force behind the development of facilities such as clinics, schools and other infrastructure such as roads, which they say the government failed to provide. Moreover, the development of tourism has afforded the community of Nqileni an opportunity to fight the imbalances that are often seen in tourism dependent areas, because the main source of tourism is community-owned and run. These are corroborated by respondents' responses below:

*"We get support from tourism because we do not get any assistance from the government. That is why I commend the support from the tourism, because in my observation, our government does not care for us."* (Respondent 1)

*"The community is gaining a lot, more especially from the tourists, which come here. Like I said, even the clinic we are building here is the result of the support that we get from tourism and the tourists, who come and visit Bulungula Lodge."* (Respondent 3)

Additionally, respondents have indicated the village and the community benefit from the generosity and ideas of tourists visiting and staying at Bulungula Lodge. This has been said to be in the form of donations (money and equipment) and ideas on how to better the lives of the community at large. Respondents further articulate that tourism affords the community an opportunity to collectively work together to ensure that there are no crimes committed against and around tourists. Furthermore, collective co-operation continues in the community through being afforded an equal say in the operations of the lodge (through regular community meetings that give mandate the management committee of the lodge), thereby attempting (success dependent of course) to eliminate elitism that can be created by projects of this nature. Respondents' comments that follow substantiate such endeavours through verbatim narrations:

*"We are also grateful that when the tourists come here they advise us to try new things that could make money for us. For example canoeing was an idea by a tourist who also donated the first canoe and today we make money out of it."* (Respondent 10).

*"I think it is growing the business because as community members and we are very alert about crime. This is why we make it our responsibility to fight it to help the growth of this business."* (Respondent 7).

*"Yes, it does. The reason for saying this is because after 2 weeks, we usually have community meetings and in those meetings, we plan and advise each other on how best we can make the tourism industry better."* (Respondent 2).

*"No decision is ever taken without the community deliberating on it."* (Respondent 25).

In addition, respondents elucidated on the role of tourism development in the economy of the area, and its concerted efforts in the alleviation of poverty. This is made evident in the credit given to the development of tourism for the creation of employment and the increase in entrepreneurial concerns within the area. Such developments are indicated not to be limited to the tourism space, as other economic sectors (such as agriculture, fishery and retail, to mention a few) have seen a considerable injection of business following the development of tourism in the area. Furthermore, the development of tourism has also afforded community



members with skills and talents in indigenous arts and crafts to enter the market space and generate an income through their wares. This has seen the emergence of a vibrant community of active participants in tourism related economic activities

Even with the positive multiplier effect demonstrated above, there is however, a voice of despondency (isolated case) that brought to the fore the limited direct employment opportunities provided by tourism (specifically the Bulungula lodge employing 23 people) in Nqileni village with a population of 1500. This gives a clear indication of the great unemployment challenges faced by rural areas, even with the development initiatives in place. However, respondents further proclaim the beneficitation of the community from tourism, irrespective of employment status, through a community trust (Bulungula Trust) established to ensure that every indigenous resident of the village benefits from the wholly community-owned and run Bulungula Lodge. The trust was set up to make certain that all indigenous citizens of the village are ensured a share of proceeds brought by tourism. This is stated to be a scheme that equitably distributes benefits and costs associated with tourism within the village. The issues discussed above are given credence by respondents' statements that follow:

*"If it weren't for the lodge, we would be starving."* (Respondent 11).

*"Tourism plays a role of alleviating poverty. Before the establishment of Bulungula lodge, people were not employed and there was nothing to do. Now, we are able to put food on the table and use our talents to get an income."* (Respondent 12).

*"I have money now. I am able to send my kids to school."* (Respondent 23).

*"Tourism helps us financially."* (Respondent 24).

*"People are able to earn an income because of the tourists that visit here."* (Respondent 20).

*"The revenue that we make out of what we get from tourists that come here assists us to achieve some of our goals."* (Respondent 22).

*"Because of tourism we are able to provide for our families. For example: There are people who have built their homes because there is tourism."* (Respondent 14).

*"Ja, I don't know. It is a difficult question because I do not think tourism is the panacea to the rural development challenges. Uh...you know, like I said, the lodge employs 23 people. Nqileni has a population of 1500. So it is not going to solve all employment problems, you know. It is not the panacea to those things. But I think...I think if you do it well you can get good jobs, meaningful work, um...with good cross-world exposure. If you do it badly it can be horrible for communities. But if you do it well it can be good."* (Respondent 18).

The findings on the role of tourism in the sustainable satisfaction of community needs, and the fight against uncertainty, is congruent with the discourse of sustainable tourism, as it rests upon the proper management of host community resources, with the aim to meet the fundamental criteria of promoting socio-economic wellbeing and livelihood of the local community, without compromising the satisfaction of the needs of the tourists (Malik & Bhat, 2015). This has been seen to be evident in the significant effect tourism expenditure has on many destinations, especially in the developing world, irrespective of whether the effect is direct, indirect or induced (Brida and Zapata, 2009). This can be exemplified by direct employment created by the Bulungula Lodge for local residents, together with locally owned and managed businesses established to serve tourists visiting the Nqileni village, with indirect benefits derived from local fresh produce providers selling vegetables, fruits, meat and fish to the Lodge for tourist consumption, and induced benefits realised with the



establishment of the Bulungula Incubator, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) established for purposes of community development established in 2007 as a result of the establishment of the Lodge in 2004 (Bulungula, 2014). This is further affirmed by Dorobantu and Nistoreaunu (2012), who state that the positive contribution to state revenue by tourist spending, together with the traffic of complementary goods (imports and exports) for the receiving area and the attraction of foreign investment, culminates into a multiplier effect that sees tourism contribute to the economic prosperity of the area. Such prosperous endeavours need to be undertaken with the assurance of equality opportunity, so as not to allow any exclusionary or discriminatory practices that could hinder people from participating economically, socially and politically in matters of development in society.

## Conclusion

The development of tourism in rural areas has been reverberated for the potential benefits associated with the phenomenon. This has seen the emergence of the concept of sustainability within the tourism sphere being afforded the much deserved attention on a multiplicity of fronts including government, development practitioners, business and communities. Such endeavours further entrenched the legitimacy of sustainable tourism as a provider of benefits of different forms (economic, social and environmental) to areas in desperate need of such doles.

This study provided the views of community members on the benefits of sustainable tourism. The results of the study surmise that community members feel that sustainable rural tourism creates both tangible and intangible benefits such as Bulungula Incubator (a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) established for purposes of community development established in 2007 as a result of the development of tourism within the area) and Bulungula Trust (a trust established to ensure that every indigenous resident of the village benefits from tourism activities within the area). It was clear from the results of the study that respondents placed more emphasis on the economic benefits of tourism and how such has improved their lives. The results infer that rural areas that want to use tourism as a strategy for economic benefits must develop tourism that is sustainable and inclusive of all community members, irrespective of their standing within their society.

Finally, the study intends not claim authority on the benefits of sustainable tourism in rural areas, but sheds light on benefits that a properly developed and managed tourism can bring to a rural and impoverished community. This can open debate and dialogue on the manner in which the development and management of tourism can bring fruition to efforts of poverty alleviation and reduction of vulnerability within rural communities. This therefore provides a platform for future research on issues around community beneficiation in tourism development and management.

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