


The Leadership Role in Sustainable Community-Based Tourism Development Within a Rural Setting


Abstract

The development of community-based tourism has seen many communities in rural areas take control of their economic well-being, social justice issues, and environmental integrity. In many quarters, this kind of freedom has been attributed to the availability of competent leadership that can mobilise the community and the resources endowed to the community. This study investigated the role of community leadership in the development of sustainable community-based tourism. The study assumed a qualitative research approach that followed an exploratory design. The chosen approach employed semi-structured interviews of 15 respondents through a non-probability sampling technique to solicit data. The collected data was analysed using NVivo software version 12, producing a comprehensive observation report accompanied by word trees, word clouds, cluster analysis, and tree maps. The study's findings produced themes indicative of the community's views concerning the role played by community leaders in the development of sustainable community-based tourism. These findings presented orations by respondents indicating contributions of community leaders in the development of sustainable community-based tourism together with the shortcomings in terms of the leaders' capacity and skills required to lead a community away from poverty and vulnerability.

Keywords: Leadership, sustainability, community-based tourism, poverty, development

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How to cite this article: Mokabe, M., Setokoe, T.J. & Ramukumba, T. (2024). The Leadership Role in Sustainable Community-Based Tourism Development Within a Rural Setting. *African Journal of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure*, 13(2):342-350. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46222/ajhtl.19770720.515>

Introduction

Scholarship dating back more than four decades has seen community-based tourism (CBT) receive attention as way in which the practice of tourism became a tool for economic development that can also be used for sustainable development endeavours that aim for the maximisation of benefits while minimising the negative impacts of tourism on the economy, society and the environment (Cook et al., 2019; Jamal & Dredge, 2014). This has seen a myriad of attempts by scholars, entrepreneurs, community activists, and tourism planners to formulate a fitting definition for the phenomenon, and yet little consensus has been reached on what exactly constitutes CBT (Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). With all the toil invested in the search for a comprehensive definition, the nature and character of CBT is consistent with what advocates of the phenomenon highlight as collaborative endeavours that include the self-determination of the host community aimed at the delivery of effective and sustainable tourism development through environmental sustainability; community participation; equitable distribution of benefits; community management, control, leadership; and ownership of tourism within their area (Kontogeorgopoulos, et al., 2014; Mayaka et al., 2018; Tolkach & King, 2015). Such a character envisages CBT to place the control, leadership and management of tourism and its planning into the hands of community members, thereby ensuring that benefits are concentrated locally (Giampiccoli et al., 2020; Kontogeorgopoulos et al. 2014).

da Conceição Walkowski et al. (2019) and Hiransomboon (2017) further make explicit the ability of CBT to enable the host community's participation in the planning and maintenance of the development of sustainable tourism. This is further asserted by a study undertaken by Sawatsuk et al. (2018) indicating the importance the local people setting the vision and mission for tourism development in their own area because of their knowledge of the capacity and needs in relation to economic interests, the preservation of their environment (Mokabe & Kruger, 2024) and social justice issues that are to be achieved through the development of sustainable tourism. This gives credence to an often-neglected aspect of literature in terms of success factors of CBT, leadership. According to Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2014) and supported by Abas et al. (2022), "leadership is often mentioned as just one of many reasons for a community's success in fostering CBT". This is contended by Maquera et al. (2022) and Sood et al. (2017) arguing that the success of CBT and many other local development initiatives largely depends on the quality of local leadership that can motivate members of the community, disseminate information, and mediate between the community and external actors, while keeping the interests of the community at heart. This can create a fertile environment for endogenously driven development that empowers locals to own the development of tourism in their own backyard, thereby allowing for ownership that enables them to walk the plans they have set themselves (Sawatsuk et al., 2018). This study aims to investigate the role played by community leaders in the quest to alleviate indigence through the development of sustainable community-based tourism. This is pursued in the form of a comprehensive literature review followed by a description of the study area, methods used to undertake the study and a discussion of the findings and recommendations.

Literature review

Community-based tourism

Supporters of rural community development have for many years advocated for less conventional economic activities for rural communities with the aim of redressing their economic backwardness (Kayat & Zainuddin, 2016). These economic activities are the type that focus on enhancing the relationship between local communities and players in economic sectors that offer



activities that will enable not only economic prosperity but also sustainable development of the area (Priatmoko et al., 2021). The benefit of such activities is said to be more evident if the initiation, planning, participation, and eventual implementation is undertaken by the local communities (Kayat & Zainuddin, 2016). With a multiplicity of economic activities available for rural areas to pursue in their quest for economic prosperity and alleviation of poverty, CBT has been orated to be a popular alternative rural development strategy (Kayat & Zainuddin, 2016; Long, 2020). As previously indicated, CBT is devoid of a universal definition. However, the phenomenon has, over time, been promoted as a mechanism for sustainable development, poverty alleviation and the conservation of biodiversity (Guo & Liu, 2022 & Nthiga et al., 2019). CBT is further purported to be a more responsible approach to tourism development as opposed to mainstream tourism, which is alleged to focus on profit maximisation with little local control of the direction of the development and can lead to disastrous consequences that include economic leakages through the repatriation of profits from developing economies to developed economies (Kayat & Zainuddin, 2016). This gives credence to Park et al. (2018) assertions propagating CBT as a pathway for economic development embedded in local communities' participation, which in turn enables effective partnerships and cooperation between key stakeholders. Such participation can be hindered by shortcomings that include but are not limited to the absence of local leadership to provide endogenous direction as opposed to an exogenous one that is often mostly focused on profitability and not cognizant of local traditions and norms of the local citizenry (Gao & Liu, 2020).

Leadership in community-based tourism

Just as indicated in the previous section, the lack of consensus in defining community-based tourism is not unique. Another concept difficult to define is leadership, something pivotal in the sustainable development of community-based tourism. Its importance is given credibility by authors such as Jaafar et al. (2020) and Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2014) asserting the importance of strong and competent leadership in the success of CBT. Elbaz and Haddoud (2017) further indicate the importance of the mastery of practical wisdom to mobilise resources for the benefit of all leadership. This is given a human face in a study conducted by Kontogeorgopoulos et al. (2014), where a *poo yai baan* (village headman) undertook to champion the initiation, development and management of CBT in Mae Kampong, Thailand. Such endeavours have become generally accepted as local leadership for community-based development initiatives such as tourism has often been favoured due to the leadership's knowledge of the prevailing local conditions, their ability to enforce rules, monitor behaviour and verify actions related to interventions (Font et al., 2023; Gohori & van der Merwe, 2022). According to Kayat et al. (2016), leadership is a critical success factor in the development of sustainable community-based tourism in rural areas as they fulfil multiple roles. These roles include but are not limited to skills to communicate the communal benefits of CBT, avoid possible disruption of the destination's relationship with external actors, and lead the resistance to expand the development of tourism beyond the community's carrying capacity (Kayat et al., 2016; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). In addition, community leaders enable the legitimization of tourism initiatives by ensuring that projects brought to the area are first carefully assessed against the development objectives of the community with the intention to safeguard the citizenry, its culture, and the physical environment (Kiss et al., 2022). This brings to the fore a trust by the community that inspires confidence in the leadership's integrity, thereby increasing the participation of the community in the pursuit of achieving stated community objectives (Haywood, 2020; Kontogeorgopoulos et al., 2014). According to Kayat et al. (2016), it is worth noting that community-based programmes require a lot more than effective leadership to produce the intended benefits. The leadership needs to be trusted and supported by the community. This can be achieved through a bottom-up approach that will see the leadership include and consult the community in the decision-making process and ensure that equal access to information is achieved, which will eliminate community members feeling alienated from the development process (Park et al., 2018). Such transparent engagements will not just create a fertile ground for the success of the development initiative but will also bring another much-needed element of ensuring success, community support (Kayat et al., 2016).

Study area

The study was undertaken in Nqileni village in the Mbashe Local Municipality of the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. According to the Mbashe Local Municipality's Integrated Development Plan [IDP] (2021), the municipality was constituted in terms of the Municipal Structures Act 17 of 1998 (as amended) and comprises the areas that previously formed the Elliotdale, Willowvale and Dutywa. In terms of the South African Local Government Municipal Demarcation Act (No. 27 of 1998), the municipality under which the study area falls is a Category B, Third Grade municipality. This is further explained by the IDP (2021) to be nestled in the south-eastern parts of the Eastern Cape province, surrounded and bound by endowments to the east, such as a coastline that flows from the Qhora River to the south into the Indian Ocean.

Research methodology

The study undertook to investigate the role of community leaders in the quest to attain the goal of sustainable development in a rural community of Nqileni village through community-based tourism. The village has, in many spaces, been heralded as a home to one of the most functional community-based tourism initiatives in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. The village is home to a 100% owned tourism concern centred around Bulungula Lodge, which is considered to not only be eco-friendly but also exemplary in terms of sustainable operational practices (Bulungula, 2022). The study employed a qualitative research approach that followed an exploratory research design. The choice of research design was given credibility by Burr et al. (2007), indicating that the design does not concern itself with formalized hypothesis and rigorous testing, but with the discovery and investigation of unique and unusual phenomena. This saw primary data collection being undertaken using face-

to-face semi-structured interviews as data collection tools. Interviewees sampled for the study were chosen using a purposive sampling technique based on the knowledge of the researcher of the role played by the interviewees in community-based tourism initiatives.

Informed consent was sought by the researcher through prior contact with the community and its leadership. This also included verbal consent for the interviews to be tape-recorded at the beginning of each interview. It is to be noted that all interviewees gave consent in relation to the interviews being tape recorded. A total of 15 interviews were conducted in the native language of the villagers, isiXhosa, with each interview lasting between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The reason for the use of the native language was because of the area's low literacy rates as indicated in the area's (Mbashe Local Municipality) Integrated Development Plan (IDP) of 2021. According to the municipality's IDP (2021), According to the municipality's IDP (2021), Mbashe Local Municipality houses a considerable number of illiterate people in the province of the Eastern Cape. This is followed by people with elementary and basic education (Grade R who attended a formal school; Grade 1-12 learners and learners in special classes) at 37%. Such literacy shortcomings gave credence for the study to undertake a qualitative research approach and necessitated data collection to be carried out in the native language of the interviewees to ensure that a detailed account is provided in the pursuit of achieving the objectives of the study. An undertaking of this nature allows for the simplicity of conducting the research in line with the chosen methodological approach, design and sampling as indicated above. The primary data collection was then followed by an exercise of translation (into English), transcription, and analysis. This saw data analysis being undertaken using NVivo software version 12, which produced an observation report accompanied by word trees, word clouds, cluster analysis and tree maps. This enabled the study to undertake a presentation of findings that saw the researcher present the findings in the form of themes and sub-themes generated from the data analysis, which will be discussed in the following section.

Results and discussion

The establishment of tourism concerns in Nqileni village has seen the community develop in ways never seen before. This has brought with it an influx of non-residents looking to experience the beauty and tranquility of the village. Such undertakings (the development of tourism and the arrival of tourists) have led to concerns for the exploitation of resources, which in turn gave rise to the host community making concerted efforts to sustain the resources to ensure that future generations can utilise the same resources to fulfill their own needs. Undertakings of this nature require leadership that will help steer initiatives in directions that will bring to the community outcomes that are not just desirable in the immediate, but also sustainable in the long term. The empirical data collected with a purpose to achieve the aim of this study was subjected to analysis that produced themes that are indicative of the community's views in relation to the role of community leaders in the development of sustainable community-based tourism in Nqileni village. The formulated themes and sub-themes paint a detailed picture of the role, contribution, and impact of community leaders on the sustainable development community-based tourism. These themes were further accentuated through word clouds, word trees and cluster analysis aimed at further illustrating the narrative of members of Nqileni village in relation to the role of community leadership in the development of sustainable community-based tourism. The presentation and discussion of the themes is undertaken in the section following.

Theme 1: Role of leadership in sustainable community-based tourism

Understanding the role of leadership in sustainable community-based tourism first requires a clear insight into the involvement and influence of individuals chosen to lead the community in tourism initiatives. This theme has been divided into sub-themes that provide a detailed account of the role of community leaders in the development of sustainable community-based tourism as indicated in the word cloud below (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Role of leadership in sustainable community-based tourism
Sub-theme 1: Involvement of leadership in community-based tourism initiatives

A detailed analysis of the interview content (as depicted in the word cloud) indicated that the leadership of the community includes participants that are actively involved in the training and development of the area. This is evident through the continued partnering with development-orientated government entities including but not limited to National Youth Development Agency (NYDA), the Eastern Cape Development Corporation (ECDC) and the Department of Economic Development, Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEDEAT). This is articulated by respondents in the form of narratives that follow:

We have cooperatives that we assist in terms of training skills development. We do so by partnering with government entities like NYDA, ECDC and the Department of Economic Development at the provincial level. We also provide training to local people in order for them to participate in the management of the Bulungula Trust.



Figure 2: Involvement of leadership in community-based tourism initiatives

In addition, the involvement of the endogenous leadership further extends to the management of existing development initiatives and structures, while intentional about identifying and sourcing opportunities that can bring further development to the area. Upon the presentation and ceasing of sourced opportunities, the leadership has an additional responsibility to place priority on the most deserving beneficiaries (e.g. families without an income) in the area. A community leader's oration provides clarity on the prioritisation of families with little or no resources: This is seen in the leader's narrative of the placing of priority on families that are poor/struggling:

The availability of employment opportunities within the area allows us to undertake a screening process to be undertaken to evaluate which family needs the employment most. We investigate the backgrounds of the families. This assists us in alleviating poverty within our community. We source funding for those areas that have been identified to have the potential of tourism development on that particular area.

The findings indicate a congruence between endeavours of the community leadership and the Constitutional prescripts intended to "improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person" (South Africa. The Constitution, 1996). The leadership's pursuit of the Constitutional mandate is further elucidated by scholars such as Saufi et al., (2014) and Setokoe et al. (2019) purporting a position that make it imperative for locals to be empowered with the prerequisite capacity to meaningful engage and participate tourism development initiatives. Such noble ambitions are possible through a leadership that is not only capable of collectively bringing together the community and local resources for the purpose of supporting and maintaining the development process within the area (Edwards, 2015; Horlings et al., 2018).



within the locality. These endeavours are illustrated through respondent accounts of efforts undertaken by local leaders to ensure that information relating to the availability of development project opportunities is disseminated transparently and fairly. Such is evidenced in the leadership's commitment to democratic undertakings of consultation and convergence of meetings aimed at affording community members an opportunity to place on record the opinions on matters relating to development within the area. This is narrated by respondents as follows:

Leaders are there to represent the community members and not act outside the community; they cannot make any decisions without consulting the community.

Yes, they do, by summoning a meeting and informing the community about the plans they have with regard with the development of the village.

They convene meetings and inform us about whatever activity that is going to be taking place.

They do try to create awareness, especially our ward councillor. I'm assuming you saw him yesterday when we had a meeting with him about the prospect of having electricity in our village. Though he is new in that position, but he is promising.

The findings echo similar sentiments as those of the Batho Pele principles, which insist on the community's right to full and accurate information relating to development initiatives undertaken within their area of residence (South Africa. Public Service Commission, 2007). The posture of the narrative held in the findings further affirms assertions of scholars such as Cooney et al. (2018) and Toomey (2016) that place atop leadership qualities in development initiatives, especially when these individuals are capable of not only disseminating information but invoke in the citizenry a belief in the value of endogenous development through active participation and maintenance of indigenous interests in their engagements with external actors. This process is not without shortcomings as opposing views were recorded from respondents. These came in the form of allegations of self-service, nepotism and cronyism on the part of the leadership. In addition, further remarks were made of a barrage of promise unfulfilled for the purpose of campaigning for community support, especially during elections time. This matter is further compounded by the unavailability of infrastructure that can enable seamless dissemination of information between stakeholders. The above discussion is further given credibility by dialogues provided below:

I would say the leaders are not doing enough to develop this place. For example, in some places, the leaders have brought about developments but just not in our community. There are services we are unfortunately do not have access to, yet every time when there are elections, we vote but still do not see any changes. We are not able to access some things, yet there are leaders that represent us.

Despite the shortcomings narrated above, the importance of quality leadership in the development of rural has been said to have the potential to move communities closer to the country's constitutional mandate (Rami et al., 2021), which to 'improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person' (South Africa, 1996). Such aspirations can bring to the fore an authentic undertaking of endogenous development that can breed an environment fertile enough to empower the citizenry to take ownership of their development and see through the plans set for the area by its people (Sawatsuk et al., 2018).

Sub-theme 2: Capacity building for community participation in the development of sustainable community-based tourism

Capacity building as a sub-theme presented much divergence as respondents could not reach consensus on the contribution of the community leadership to the building of capacity amongst the locals for the purpose of enabling active and meaningful participation in development initiatives undertaken with the locale. This was presented by narratives that indicated shortcomings on the part of the leaders due to factors that include but not limited to (i) availability of resources, (ii) limited capabilities of the leaders themselves, and (iii) the overextension by the leaders with the aim to make better the lives of the community – simply due to a myriad of needs the community has. These concerns are accentuated by the narratives that follow:

I would say the leaders are not doing enough to develop this place. For example, in some places, the leaders have brought about developments but just not in our community. There are services we are unfortunately not have access to, yet every time when there are elections, we vote but still do not see any changes. We are not able to access some things, yet there are leaders that represent us.

Leaders do not have enough resources to equip community members, so that they can do things for themselves.

So, I don't think there's capacitating in terms of training. So that is not happening from the community leadership side because they themselves are not equipped with the requisite skills.

I would say they don't, our leaders are involved in many things and come short when it comes to tourism related matters. The leaders are mostly involved in services from the government, i.e., water and electricity.

Even with the negative sentiment indicated above, there was a prevailing sense of positivity in other sections of the community. This saw respondents indicate the considerable efforts made by the leadership that is aimed at empowering and capacitating the community with the requisite know-how to actively participation in development initiatives within the locality. These acts of leadership are orated to be made possible through training undertakings organised for members of the community to procure the necessary skills in areas prudent to the development of tourism such as hospitality, bookkeeping, and other managerial

functions needed in running a business. Notwithstanding the skills previously mentioned, more capacity building opportunities in the form of community members participating in committees responsible for the planning, implementation, and management of development initiatives become available, further exposing these community members to skilled individuals (mainly external stakeholders). This is given credence by the following proclamations:

Workshops are run where skills are taught, especially in tourism and hospitality and entrepreneurship. Some of the ladies in the village were trained to do massages, while other people were taught business skills. ...so certainly, there is space for communities to participate on health committees, educational committees, and high school committees. We've got parent committees at all the ECD centres, the large committee. So those are opportunities to develop skills and capacity and get exposure to what it takes to make things run.

The above narrative presents two sides of the same coin in relation to the community leadership's capabilities in terms of building capacity that will enable meaningful community participation in development initiatives. This is made evident by Rami et al. (2021), indicating the importance of capacity building to exercise empowerment of individuals to have a sense of control over their own development and respond to changes in a manner befitting the conditions on the ground. This places individuals in leadership in a position to play an essential role that sees participants acquire skills and knowledge that will enable them to respond appropriately to changes happening in their area of residence (Ajayi & Otuya, 2006; Rami et al., 2021). This breeds an environment that allows for the empowerment of the locals through the development of skills that will enable a better and more informed involvement in the decision-making processes aimed at the development of the area (Shafieisabet & Haratifard, 2020). Consequently, these undertakings and their outcomes often bring a reservoir of capabilities that can transform the community into leaders and entrepreneurs (Dahles et al., 2020; Piabuo et al., 2023; Zahra & Wright, 2016).

Theme 3: The impact of leadership involvement in tourism on the development of the area

The findings revealed a positive and progressive outlook by respondents with regards to the involvement of a collective leadership (traditional, government and business). This has seen the collective putting effort in ensuring the members of the community, especially the youth, are empowered to participate in tourism development initiatives. Such undertakings were indicated to have borne fruits through collaborative efforts of both the municipality and the village's traditional leadership. This is further elaborated on by a respondent's dialogue stating:

We claim no easy victory. It's been eight months now since I have started working here and during this period, we have been searching for skills to develop. We have crafters around who specialise in bead work as well grass mat makers who make mats like the one you are sitting on. This is what these people are doing, and we also attend youth summits that the municipality provides where we empower our youth by taking them to trainings and they are taught about the economic development.



Figure 4: The impact of leadership involvement in tourism on the development of the area

In addition to the above narration is further given credence by a narrative that indicates the community leadership's commitment to encouraging the transfer of skills that will pave way to sustainable tourism development practices within the village. This is narrated by a respondent as follows:

I would say that the leadership of the community has an impact on the village's development. As this is my last year of service here at the Bulungula Lodge, I am going to handover to my co-workers, just the manager before me did to me. As a manager for the last three years, I have taught my colleagues who are now ready to take over from me.



The efforts orated by the respondents regarding efforts the leadership are evidently in line with the findings of scholars such as Giampiccoli & Dłużewska (2021); Khosravi et.al. (2015); Moyo and Tichaawa (2017) and Mtapuri, Thanh. This is evident in the scholars' indication of the leaders bringing to the fore capacity development that is consistent to the village's ambitions of being able to be partake in the decision-making processes that will ensure full participation in tourism activities, which can also safeguard the accrual of maximum economic, social, and environmental benefit, while maintaining the associated costs to a minimal. In addition, achieving the desired goal of sustainability (be it for tourism or any other development initiative) will require the building of strong adaptive capabilities within communities, which can be achieved through continued and consistent community participation (Budeanu et al., 2016; Eyisi et al., 2021; Flores & Costa, 2022) which is something that is consistent with the narrative perpetuated by the respondents.

Conclusion

Community-based tourism has been heralded as a panacea to poverty alleviation, especially in marginalised communities of the developing world. This has seen such communities make concerted efforts to eradicate poverty and vulnerability. Such undertakings without proper planning and organisation can seriously harm the community, environment, and economy, thus making homegrown leadership important to the success and sustainability of development initiatives. Evidence of the importance of leadership in the development of sustainable community-based tourism can be seen in the accounts provided by the respondents during the collection of the study's empirical data. This included but was not limited to the contribution of local leaders to building capacity and the role played by these individuals or groups in ensuring endogenous development within the village. The picture painted would not be complete without a voice of discontent that reports a lack of capacity within the leadership and shortcomings in how information is disseminated to encourage local participation in development initiatives. This leaves room for investigation of the shortcomings relating to not only the assignment of responsibility in terms of the leadership of development initiatives but also the capacity of those entrusted with releasing the citizenry from poverty and vulnerability. Finally, the study does not intend to claim authority over leadership's role in sustainable community-based tourism development but to bring to the fore returns that proper and capable leadership can bring to a community that aspires to freedom from poverty and vulnerability. The narrative in the study allows for debate and dialogue on how to assist in waging opposition against the scourge of poverty in rural areas. This, therefore, affords the researchers space and opportunity to further undertake studies that can address some of the shortcomings identified in this study and many other issues relating to leadership of development initiatives within rural settings.

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