

**'An analysis of community involvement into ecotourism arrangements'**

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**Abstract**

Driven by the discussion on sustainability and by the need for addressing local development and nature conservation issues, tourism researchers and practitioners have attempted to find ways to make tourism meaningful for both nature and local communities. As a result, in the past decades several ecotourism arrangements involving communities with different level of participations were developed. This study seeks to analyze the development of various existing ecotourism arrangements, to classify them and to briefly investigate their consequences in terms of local empowerment, expected benefits and the main constraints. The analysis focuses on developing countries, with particular emphasis to Sub-Saharan Africa. Based on literature study, this paper investigates findings presented on a number of peer-reviewed articles, reports from research institutes and governmental and non-governmental organizations, conference proceedings, books as well as newsletter and notes from relevant web sources. Findings indicate the high complexity of community involvement as well as empowerment issues in ecotourism.

**1. Introduction**

The 1992 Rio Earth Summit challenged actors at different levels, also in the tourism field, to adopt sustainable strategies and pursue goals that serve environmental and development purposes. The consequent Agenda 21 enriched the discussion by emphasizing the need for community participation in policy and planning and for community management, also in the case of tourism resources (Jackson and Morpeth, 1998). The development of specific and concrete UN Millenium Development Goals (MDGs) and Targets have pushed the policy agenda towards more actions for local development and conservation. Driven by these discussions tourism researchers and practitioners have attempted to find ways to make tourism meaningful for nature and for communities through, for example, the development of ecotourism arrangements involving locals with different level of participation. To date, however, research studies critically discussing community involvement in ecotourism arrangements appear to be very scattered and a systematic analysis of these various arrangements in terms of their significance for local development and empowerment is actually lacking.

This study is an attempt to address this gap by analyzing existing ecotourism arrangements and their consequences for the local community. We first examine the change over time into the conservation and development agenda and the need to include livelihood issues into policy plans and projects, including ecotourism ones. Then we classify, according to ownership and rights of land and resources, and analyze a number of possible ecotourism arrangements involving local communities. Based on literature analysis and by presenting few case studies we briefly examine some possible arrangements according to their key impacts in terms of local empowerment, expected benefits and some constraints. Due to the limited length of this paper we focus only on the main issues and give

few examples. The analysis focuses on low-income economies in developing countries, especially Sub-Saharan Africa considering the importance of this area in the international agenda (UN, 2007).

## **2. Ecotourism and the evolution of the conservation and development agenda**

Several definitions of the term “ecotourism” are available in literature (see for example Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Honey, 1999; Scheyvens, 1999; WWF, 2001; [www.ecotourism.org](http://www.ecotourism.org)). However, in spite of the different analytical interpretations and various nuances given to ecotourism, in a broad sense the term ‘ecotourism’ evolved from the need to bridge the development and conservation agendas and to involve communities into conservation and development plans (Butcher, 2007). This section investigates and synthesizes the shift over time into conservation and development thinking and the need to address livelihood issues. This short reflection aims to provide the conceptual context on which specific ecotourism strategies, involving communities with different levels of participation, are developed and which will be analyzed in the following section.

Within the conservation agenda, since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dominant approach towards conservation and preservation of biodiversity was the establishment of protected areas (Adams, 2004). Alarmed by the decline in natural resources and wildlife a number of protectionist and coercive policies were set in place especially in the 1950s and 1960s. Such approach, also called “Fortress Conservation”, focused on establishing protected areas, excluding or limiting local people to access these areas for consumptive use and enforced these rules through a “fines and fences” method (Adams and Hulme, 2001). Later, since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was recognized that a conservation approach based on site protection and on maintaining biodiversity for its sake was actually not sufficient or feasible (Adams, 2004). Conflict issues with the adjacent communities related to land and resource use, the negative social and economic impacts on poverty, ethical issues related to legal and human rights, high financial costs for the implementation and protections of parks and reserves has lead to the realization that development and livelihood issues should have been included in the conservation agenda (e.g. Kiss, 1990; Colchester, 2002). The focus of policies and plans thus slowly shifted from a Fortress Conservation paradigm to the involvement of local communities into conservation plans.

On this line of thought several international organizations such as WWF, IUCN, Conservation International as well as national and local NGO’s have funded and/or supported programs throughout the world to achieve conservation goals while addressing development issues, including ecotourism projects (e.g. Butcher, 2007). For example, the program “Integrated Conservation and Development Projects” (ICDPs) was first introduced in the mid 1980’s by WWF with the intent of overcoming problems with the ‘fines and fences’ approach to conservation in protected areas. Ecotourism ICDPs are projects that consider ecotourism as a tool to address conservation and development goals for local communities (Scheyvens, 2002). Such projects applied later on in several developing countries consider that people and livelihood practices are a threat to the biodiversity resources and that community can act to conserve resources if they have a ‘stake’ in decision-making about use and management of the resources (Hughes and Flintan, 2001). In practice, these projects are implemented through a number of arrangements which involve community through for example revenue sharing, shared-decision making authority, provision of community services and

infrastructures, etc. The community can benefit from these arrangements, in exchange for its support to conservation (Newmark and Hough, 2000). In spite of the good intention of the implementation of such projects, they either failed in achieving the objectives placed or achieved only limited success. This was a result of a number of factors including the difficulty of ensuring proper distribution of benefits to individuals, the difficulty of modifying individual behaviour of communities towards conservation through the incentives provided to them, the lack of greater control and authority of communities over the use of natural resources which could likely mimic earlier ineffective colonial structures (Newmark and Hough, 2000).

In the attempt to achieve conservation and development goals and learning from these experiences new approaches were developed. For example several projects were established within the broad family of Community-Based Natural Resources Management (CBNRM) programmes (see: [www.cbnrm.net](http://www.cbnrm.net)). Such programmes involved a greater level of community control over natural resource use in rural areas. These programs use to a large extent a bottom-up approach taking local communities as a point of departure, empowering them, and creating a social movement around managing local natural resources. This change in the way of thinking within the conservation agenda and the need to merge conservation goals with development ones gave rise in the last decades to a number of community-based programs overall in the world, including community-based ecotourism ones. These programs, instead of offering development services in exchange for conservation as previous programs like the above mentioned revenue-sharing mechanisms did, were mainly focusing on devolving management responsibility for natural resources to communities (Newmark and Hough, 2000).

The development of such projects is however not only the consequence of the changing view on conservation, but also the consequence of the evolution of theoretical perspectives and practices on tourism and development. Scheyvens (2007) and van der Duim (2008) explain that the liberal approach to tourism and modernization theory, which informed development practices from the 1950s through the 1970s focusing on promoting economic growth in developing countries, did not lead to the benefits hoped, as the economic growth did not actually benefit the poor. The consequent neoliberal perspective in 1970s and 1980s emphasizing free market processes and the private sector tourism development was also criticized because it did not appear to contribute much to reduce inequalities between the developed and developing world. Alternative approaches were then suggested such as for example community-based forms of tourism and ecotourism attempting to bring benefits to local communities while conserving the natural resources on which the poor rely for their survival. As a consequence, at the turn of this last century, grassroots development, local participation into management and decision making, equity and empowerment were particularly emphasized through the development of ecotourism initiatives.

### **3. An analysis of arrangements involving communities into ecotourism**

A number of arrangements can be identified for addressing conservation and development issues while involving communities with different levels of participation (e.g. Ashley and Garland 1994; Ashley and Jones, 2001; Ashley and Ntshona, 2002; Barrow and Murphree, 2001). Arrangements can be classified according to different frameworks and perspectives, based for example on type of local

participation, type of actors involved, type of resource management modalities, etc.. Barrow and Murphree (2001) and Barrow et al., (2000) have developed a framework based on tenure of land and resources which allows for a classification of possible arrangements which can then be comprehensively analyzed in terms for example of different types of participation and responsibilities of actors, different forms of resources use and access arrangements, different forms of benefit flows, etc. Their analysis however focuses on community conservation arrangements only and does not specifically address ecotourism ones. Additionally, the analysis considers that all lands and natural resources belong to the state, which can then grant specific rights to communities, and does therefore not include cases in which communities own land and resources.

In this study, in order to analyze ecotourism arrangements meaningful for locals, building on the framework developed by Barrow and Murphree (2001) and Barrow et al. (2000), we use tenure of land and resources as a starting point to distinguish a number of tenurial categories under which few possible ecotourism arrangements can be analyzed. Thus, firstly we distinguish the following three tenurial categories:

1. **State** owns land and manages resources and ecotourism plans
2. **State** owns land. **Communities** have rights on land and natural resources and make ecotourism plans
3. **Communities** own land and manage resources and ecotourism plans

Secondly, below in this section, within each category we analyze few possible arrangements involving local communities into ecotourism. By using some case studies and main discussion in literature<sup>151</sup> we reflect upon these arrangements by analyzing them mainly according to few key impacts in terms of local empowerment. We reflect on different forms of empowerment such as economic, psychological, social and political empowerment, following the framework developed by Scheyvens (1999). Additionally, we highlight some major benefits and constraints.

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<sup>151</sup> The selection of case studies and relevant literature is performed by using the search engine *Google Scholar*. Firstly, relevant papers, and included case studied, are preliminary selected based on a number of keywords, variously combined among them, such as “ecotourism”, “community(-based)”, “development”, “conservation”, “poverty reduction”, “nature protection”, “private sector”, “wildlife”, “Africa”. The abstracts of such preliminary papers are read in order to exclude those only marginally dealing with the object of the analysis. The remaining key papers are selected and carefully read and analyzed. Secondly, a scan of the list of references reported in these selected papers is made in order to identify and analyze additional papers dealing with the issues investigated in this study. Thirdly, this study also includes key findings of papers presented at the UNWTO conference focusing on the contribution of ecotourism to community development, poverty reduction and financing of protected areas (Maputo, 5-7 Nov. 2008). Fourthly, meaningful information presented in newsletters and notes from relevant websites is also reported in this study. In conclusion, the papers analyzed for this study include peer-reviewed articles, reports from research institutes and governmental and non-governmental organizations, conference proceedings, books as well as newsletter and notes from relevant web sources.

### **1. State owns land and manages resources and ecotourism plans**

The change in paradigm in the conservation and development agenda since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (as pointed out in Section 3) has favoured the development of ecotourism programs addressing livelihood and communities issues. Driven by this agenda, the State, which owns the land and resources, has set plans and programs, including ecotourism ones, which did acknowledge communities needs. Specific policies and plans are developed in many cases in combination with other agents such as public-private partnership. The community is involved in an indirect manner in the sense that there is a limited or a lack of local participation in ecotourism decision-making and a lack of sense of proprietorship by locals. Communities are mainly following choices made at a higher level.

*Revenue-sharing mechanisms* are an example of possible arrangements within this tenure category. These mechanisms are based on the assumption that providing financial support (a share of the ecotourism revenue gained) to communities affected by restrictions imposed on them for conservation and ecotourism purposes, can help to reduce pressure on natural resource and thus support conservation and development. Such arrangements can occur when for example public authorities or other bodies establish parks and develop ecotourism in areas previously accessed by communities. In exchange for the costs that the community needs to bear due to the lack of (or reduced) access to land and resources, the community receive a financial incentive contributing thus indirectly to ecotourism development. For example, at the beginning of the '70s, when the Liwonde National Park in the southern part of Malawi was gazetted, locals were asked to move out of the park. The Park developed into a wildlife tourism destination. Acknowledging the difficult livelihood conditions of the local communities and the importance of local support for the survival and management of protected areas, incentives were offered to the locals in order to reduce pressure on natural resources. It was agreed that the local community would take 50% of the total Park revenue (Novelli and Scarth, 2007). Similarly, in Nepal, the establishment of the Chitwan National Park in 1973, led to the relocation of communities residing in that area. Recognizing the consequent challenge for the community and their survival and in order to reduce poaching incidents and other illegal activities inside the park, the government decided to bestow 30-50% of the annual park revenue to the community (UNDP, 2008; WWF, 2008). Very often revenues are placed into community funds which supports the development of community projects. This is for example the case of the Mgahinga Gorilla National Park in Uganda which has a revenue-sharing program based on visitor fees which are placed on funds destined to support the construction of school buildings, roads and other infrastructures (Adams and Infield, 2001). These revenue sharing arrangements, assuming that they are successful, can contribute to local economic empowerment because of the financial benefits received and because the community in some cases may gain control over the revenue share. However, this may not solve the problem of passive economic dependency of local communities, as locals are only indirectly responsible of tourism revenue production; they are only the beneficiaries, assuming proper distribution of resources, of ecotourism plans and choices mainly made at a higher level. In some cases the costs they need to bear (due to lack or reduced access of resources) are higher than the benefits they get. In successful cases these mechanisms can help improve community attitudes towards conservation by returning revenue from natural resources exploitation and wildlife use. However, in the case of communities feeling that there is no other

option for livelihood than to accept the incentive offered, such arrangements may generate detrimental effects and can be coercive (Novelli and Scarth, 2007).

*Employment arrangements* are another example of the possible arrangements involving locals. Employment possibilities for community members can emerge as a consequence of policy plans and programs addressing the financial needs of communities living next to parks and reserves. Community members can be employed (e.g. as cooks, waiters, guides) regularly or occasionally by private operators and entrepreneurs developing ecotourism in certain areas. For example, as a consequence of the public-private partnership between the state organization SAN Parks and private operators, these operators have the legal right to develop tourism, to build and operate tourism facilities, such as lodges, etc. in certain areas of the parks. Next to a number of commitments made by the operators towards the community (such as revenue sharing), the private operators agreed to offer to the community employment arrangements. In effect 79% of total employees are recruited from communities adjacent to the Parks (Varghese, 2008). Employment arrangements can be very significant for local communities, mainly contributing to economic empowerment because of the gained financial benefits, and to psychological empowerment because of the increased sense of self-confidence derived from the development of skills, an increase in terms of status, etc. Regular wages provide locals of the possibility to further develop their competence and increase their sense of security. Also, occasional earning opportunities, such as in the case of casual labourers, can contribute to local economic development (Ashley, 2000). However, in many cases local employees are often skilled or semi-skilled individuals with some social connection and in some cases, speaking a reasonable level of English which keeps the more disadvantaged out of the picture (Ashley and Ntshona, 2002). Additionally, often tourism arrangements may not generate permanent jobs for more than a small proportion of households in a community (Ashley, 2000). Also, the control of the enterprise remains in the hands of private entrepreneurs and thus locals have meagre say into tourism plans. Conservation issues can be addressed but not necessarily by all members of a community as some members that are not employed and not receiving a direct benefit from conservation, do not perceive any advantage from conservation activities (Ashley and Garland, 2004). In some cases, certain tourism arrangements can bring about some costs for community members not benefiting from employment, due to reduced access to local resources and land.

## **2. State owns land. Communities have rights on land and natural resources and make ecotourism plans**

By giving the community responsibility and rights over land, wildlife and resources, which were previously owned by the public bodies, it is attempted to empower locals and contribute to sustainable livelihood and conservation.

Communities can develop *community-private ventures*. By gaining rights and responsibility on the use of available resources communities, organized in community-based organizations such as Trusts and Conservancies, are then able to negotiate their use with other actors such as private investors. For example, in several areas in Namibia, communities gained rights from the government over natural resources. Communities then established legally registered institutions, the so called Conservancies. The Conservancies have a committee formed by community members that are

required to have a sustainable behaviour and management approach towards the use of wildlife. Companies can enter into ventures with the Conservancy and pay for the use of certain land or resources (Ashley, 2000). For example, in the Kunene region in Namibia, the community first represented by the Residents Trust and later by the Torra Conservancy, negotiated with the Wilderness Safari (WS) the establishment of a lodge (the Damaraland Camp) in the communal area. WS, an African company, agrees to pay to the community a levy per bed-night, to pay a flat fee for renting the site of the lodge, to hire community members for local services such as buying wood, washing laundry, etc. Additionally, after 10 years, WS gives an option to the community to continue alone in this venture or to renew the joint venture contract for other 5 years and take over at the end of this period (Ashley and Jones, 2001). Joint ventures between communities and the private sectors can occur also through other modalities for example through hunting and photographic safaris in the communal area. Novelli and Gebhardt (2007) investigated the outcome of tourism development in the Kunene region in Namibia. The Conservancies favoured the conservation of natural resources. They have increased employment and income deriving also from other sources (artwork, souvenirs, stones, etc) and improved the living standard of communities due to the fact that households received direct payments from hunting and lodging leading thus to economic and social empowerment. The devolution of rights and the ability of the locals to manage resources, to act in their own interests and negotiate with privates and other actors have increased the level of self-confidence of the community members and thus favoured psychological and political empowerment.

Similarly in several areas in Botswana communities have formed Trusts through which communities are granted access and use of land and related natural resources for ecotourism purposes (see Mbaiwa, 2008). The Trusts are guided by constitutions agreed by communities and are engaged in various tourism activities also jointly with the private sectors, such as sub-leasing community tourism areas to privates, selling wildlife quotas to tourism companies, managing cultural tourism, marketing baskets and crafts, photographic tourism, etc. Also in this case, the devolution of rights contributed to political, social and psychological empowerment since community members have a say and make common choices with regard to the management of land and resources and are directly responsible for improving their livelihoods. Additionally, the economic benefits deriving from tourism and the access to land resulted in a reduction of poaching activities and the contribution of communities to nature conservation. From the economic point of view, financial benefits deriving from the various arrangements with the private sector can flow in different directions. They can be destined to community funds. The community invests then the earnings in social services and development projects such as assistance for disabled people, for orphans and for elderly people; development in terms of infrastructure, transportation and communication tools; scholarships and support for local activities. Financial benefits can also be bestowed to individuals that receive income in the form of dividends. In the case of the Sankoyo Village, the community Trust distributes annual income to each household. In any case the income received at a household level is very small and often individuals rely on agricultural production and other activities for sustenance. However, in some cases it has been reported that funds from ecotourism were misappropriated, mismanaged and due to lack of entrepreneurial skills funds were not reinvested. In fact, one of the main weaknesses reported with

regard to ecotourism development and the establishment of the Trusts is the lack of a fair and equitable distribution mechanism for sharing benefits within the community.

Also, operators and communities need to adapt to each others' paste and style of negotiation. The negotiation process requires some skills at the community level, which the community may not possess. Additionally, the community members have to internally come to an agreement as a community and be able to secure a good deal with external companies. Internal conflicts among community members in relation to alternative land use (e.g. consumptive versus non-consumptive use of wildlife), the lack of communication and lack of teamwork among community members can hamper the development of possible projects (Novelli and Gebhardt, 2007). In some cases these issues among community members can slow down the negotiation process (Ashley and Jones, 2001). For this, often the donors, conservation and development organizations can play a relevant role in supporting communities through educational, training and conflict-solving programs. On the other side, companies who want to quickly profit from the investment, should be willing to invest their time in negotiation and adaptation to the paste of the communities (Ashley and Jones, 2001; Frost and Bond, 2008). Lastly, the option given to the community to purchase and manage the assets (i.e. a lodge) after a number of years, offers interesting possibilities for further empowerment of the community. But it also raises the question whether the community can manage to run the assets on its own or needs to rely on long-term support of external organizations.

\*The development of *community-run enterprises* and other examples of possible arrangements within this tenure category\*. Community members can get access to land and resources and develop and run various types of enterprises, for example establishing a campsite, game lodges, natural-made craft shops, etc. This can lead to economic empowerment and as a consequence of an increase in terms of skills and self-confidence also to psychological empowerment. However the assistance of donors, conservation and development organizations can play a major role in the development of community based enterprises. Salafsky et al. 2001 have tested 39 conservation projects in Asia and the Pacific and 48 community based enterprises, including eco lodges in the time span of 4 years. They found that a community based enterprise strategy can lead to conservation under certain conditions and *never on its own*, suggesting therefore how important the role of supporting institutions can be. Important factors influencing enterprise success (and related conservation) was local education and awareness, good management and book keeping skills, an established but not too competitive market, good market research, and an enterprise that utilises skills and technologies that the community members already possess. It is suggested that there is a strong association between the success of an enterprise and the degree of local community ownership and management of the enterprise. However, despite financial and technical support, community based enterprise may be difficult to establish. Out of the 37 community based enterprises for which financial data were available, 7 had no or minimal revenue, 13 covered only their variable costs, 10 covered their variable and fixed costs, and only 7 made profit. However it is assessed that some enterprises were able to make progress towards long term viability.



### 3. Communities own land and manage resources and ecotourism plans

In the case of which communities own land and resources, they do have a final say about the choices and management on land use and resource management and thus their level of political, social, psychological and economic empowerment be higher. Land ownership can be transferred to communities for example as a consequence of post-apartheid land restitution in South Africa. An example of such an approach is the devolution of land ownership to the Makuleke community in South Africa (Massyn, 2008). After removing the Makuleke community from their land in 1969 between the Luvuvu and Limpopo Rivers, the state agreed in 1998 to give the land back to its people. That land was incorporated into the Kruger Park as a contractual park. The Makuleke community agreed to guarantee the management of the land according to conservation principles, to not undertake any activity that could compromise these principles and to follow the wildlife management policies of the state organization SAN Parks. The community, organized in a legal association called the Makuleke Communal Property Association (CPA), had the right, independently from the state, to commercialise the land and establish partnership with the private sector for building for example game lodges and camps. *Community-private ventures* were then set in place and a commercial plan was developed. For this the Makuleke CPA benefited from the support of a team of external tourism and development practitioners, including tourism industries advisors from the major private lodge operating companies. This has led to the establishment of a number of ventures between CPA and private companies, selected through bidding. The Makuleke CPA made a 30-year or 45-year agreement concessions to private companies. Among other things the concession agreement granted the private partners the right to Build, Operate and Transfer back (called BOT concession) luxury lodges in the Makuleke land and the right of conducting game viewing excursions. The economic benefits to the community include land rentals by private investors to the CPA, profits or dividends that the Makuleke people will earn as shareholders in the lodge companies; and employment. Hunting concessions were also negotiated and agreed.

Massyn (2008) points out that the approach has encountered some problems due to the opposition of state's conservation organizations which, as a consequence of the devolution of land ownership to communities, is losing a valuable income stream deriving from the commercial tourism development of the area. Furthermore, this Makuleke 'model' seems to jeopardize the control of these organizations to the conservation assets, generating thus conflicts with regard to management. Additionally, the author suggests that although this 'model' has generated gains at a community level due to the re-gained ownership of the land, the community may not have optimised the integration of their land into the market. The main reason for this is that the Makuleke CPA did not attempt to raise capital for investment in the lodges infrastructure, which could have generated substantial returns. Instead, the CPA agreed to rent their land to investors that raised capital privately. This finding thus suggests that re-gained ownership and capacity building should be coupled to strategies that optimise the integration of the poor into the market, if the strategy is meant to contribute to poverty reduction and economic empowerment in the long run.

### 4. Concluding remarks

This paper has analyzed the underlying discourses and the evolution in the development and conservation agenda which led to the implementation of various ecotourism arrangements involving

communities with different levels of participation. This study has classified, according to tenure of land and resources, a number of possible ecotourism arrangements, like revenue sharing mechanisms, employment arrangements, community-private partnerships and community-run enterprises. Then, based on a number of case studies and findings in literature this paper has made a first attempt to investigate some possible consequences of the selected arrangements in terms of local empowerment, expected benefits and main constraints.

This analysis has highlighted the high complexity of ecotourism arrangements involving communities. To give a straightforward answer about the consequences of ecotourism arrangements is very difficult if not impossible due to the variety and complexity of issues that need to be taken into account, the lack of comparative studies and the lack of long term in-depth analysis. Generally speaking, the level of empowerment of local communities has a high chance of increasing with the increase of land and natural resource management responsibilities and rights devolved to local communities. Joint ventures with the private sector can favour a deeper involvement of local communities into ecotourism plans, stimulate them to directly improve their livelihood and increase their capability to act in their own interests. On the other hand, due to the lack of education, awareness, skills, negotiation capabilities, etc., in the majority of cases communities rely upon the help of donors as well as societal and conservation organizations for carrying out their plans. If on one side it is argued that the support of external agents is essential for community involvement into ecotourism plans, on the other hand, it is also argued that heavy reliance on external support and donor-funding in the long run can only reinforce dependency and that community based arrangements are often destined to collapse after funding dries up and they may not succeed because of poor governance and poor market access. Further analysis is needed in order to identify additional challenges and constraints with regard to community involvement into ecotourism and to suggest a way forward.

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