

-RESEARCH ARTICLE-

## **SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT: A REVIEW ON THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS OF COMMUNITIES PRACTICING ECOTOURISM IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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### **—Abstract —**

Ecotourism has become one of the common strategies that South Africa has adopted to mobilise the financial resources to help improve the local economy of previously destitute societies within the grounds of tourist places. However, communities that practice ecotourism and protect natural resources have remained underdeveloped regardless of the efforts invested in assisting them to generate income and improve their quality of life. Their socio-economic status does not compliment the goals of sustainable community development such as alleviating poverty, ensuring skills development, gender equity, good quality education, good health and reducing hunger, among others. Therefore, this paper theoretically reviews the socio-economic status of communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa in calling for a need for sustainable community development. Literature review of documents inclusive of government documents, newspapers and scholarly journal articles in relation to socio-economic status of communities practicing ecotourism was conducted. Seemingly, the socio-economic status of the majority of communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa is not appropriate mainly because they are still unable to sustain themselves and their families. Most communities are still far from reaching the zero-hunger goal of sustainable development, their quality of education remains poor, gender inequality is still

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dominant while poverty levels are still very high. Therefore, this situation suggests that sustainable community development within ecotourism communities still remains a dream to be achieved. The theoretical paper concludes that the socio-economic status of communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa is not in a good state that is required and necessary to compliment the goals of sustainable development. The paper recommends that institutions which are in the forefront of ecotourism in South Africa should work together with the government, different communities and other relevant stakeholders in ensuring that sustainable community development becomes a reality. That is, every ecotour undertaken within such communities should contribute positively to the socio-economic status of concerned communities in South Africa.

**Key Words:** Socio-economic status, Ecotourism, Sustainable Development, Communities, Development and South Africa

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) resulted from depleting environmental natural resources, which was noted globally (Kry, Sasaki, Datta, Abe, Ken and Tsusaka, 2020; Ma, Cai, Zheng, and Wen, 2019; Ma, Yin, Zheng, Wen, Hou, 2019; Cobbinah, 2015). These goals hope to restore degraded land, reduce land degradation and depletion, improve livelihoods of rural communities and slow down deforestation through ecotourism (Kry *et al.*, 2020). Accordingly, ecotourism contributes to achieving goals 12.2 and 15.2 of the SDGs which are stated as follows: “to achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources by 2030; and, to promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally by 2020”, respectively (cited in Kry *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, ecotourism hopes to reduce environmental degradation; improve rural livelihoods, natural resource management and conservation; and, poverty alleviation in poor rural communities (Kry *et al.*, 2020; Ma, Cai, *et al.*, 2019; Kimengsi *et al.*, 2019; Cobbinah, 2015).

The International Ecotourism Society (1991; 2005 cited in Kry *et al.*, 2020: 1) defines ecotourism as “the responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the welfare of local people”. Fennell (2003 cited in Cobbinah, 2015: 180) further perceives ecotourism as “a sustainable form of natural resource-based tourism, that is fundamentally geared towards experiencing

and gaining deeper insight about nature, and which is ethically managed to be low-impact, non-consumptive and locally oriented, in terms of control of resources and benefits to the people". Fennell's definition consists of five key variables namely, '*the natural environment*', '*education*', '*protection or conservation of resources*', '*preservation of culture*' and '*community benefits*'. According to Hillel (2002 cited in Cobbinah, 2015: 180), ecotourism "should integrate the three objectives/pillars of sustainable development, and involve a positive contribution to the conservation of sensitive ecosystems and protected areas through financial and political support, as well as ensuring active participation from, and economic benefits to local communities and indigenous people, coupled with environmental education of the host communities, professionals and guests". Seemingly, Hillel's definition incorporates issues of sustainability, equity as well as abuse of ecotourism. The Ecotourism Society Pakistan (2002 cited in Cobbinah, 2015: 181) defined ecotourism as "a travelling activity that generates direct financial benefits to local people, educates travellers to respect local cultures, and supports small stakeholders to ensure local development, while discouraging mass tourism, mass constructions and activities in fragile areas". In addition to the environment, this definition emphasises the importance of socio-economic development specifically in developing countries.

Just as sustainable development is key to ecotourism, so is poverty reduction, especially in developing countries such as South Africa. The country has become a target of choice for most foreign tourists across different countries due to its natural assets in the form of biodiversity regardless of its previous isolation as a result of apartheid (Mbaiwa, 2018; Govender, Jury, Mthembu, Hatesse and Bulfoni, 2005). Ecotourism has become one of the strategies adopted by the government of South Africa to draw the financial resources and help improve the local economic development amongst societies previously destitute within the grounds of tourist places (Mthembu, 2012; Govender *et al.*, 2005). However, communities that practice ecotourism and try to protect natural resources have remained underdeveloped (Mbaiwa, 2018; Govender *et al.*, 2005). Their socio-economic status does not compliment the goals of sustainable community development such as alleviating poverty, ensuring skills development, gender equity, good quality education, good health and reducing hunger, among others. That is, beneficiary communities do not benefit from ecotourism and their socio-economic status has been adversely affected. This has left sustainable development in communities isolated and difficult to achieve. Therefore, this paper will theoretically discuss the socio-economic status of communities

practicing ecotourism in South Africa in calling for a need for sustainable community development.

To achieve its purpose, the paper has five sections inclusive of this introduction and the conclusion. The second section discusses ecotourism and how it could be used as a mechanism for development. In the third section, the principles as well as the theoretical framework of sustainable community development are discussed in order to understand what sustainability entails for communities that practice ecotourism. The fourth section discusses the community's current socio-economic status in order to demonstrate that there is a need to achieve sustainable community development through ecotourism in South Africa. The paper then concludes that the socio-economic status of communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa does not complement the goals of sustainable development.

## **2. ECOTOURISM FOR DEVELOPMENT**

Ecotourism is a growing industry in the communities of South Africa as well as a major factor in the process of achieving the zero-goal of sustainable development, ensuring quality education, gender equity, skills development and ensuring good health for all communities (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli, 2019). Through ecotourism, revenue from tax paid by the nature reserves is generated by tourists. Ideally, these revenues should help in financing programmes that could be used in the process of achieving the zero-hunger goal of sustainable development (Das and Chaterjee, 2015). The revenues from tax should also assist in terms of funding the agricultural needs of all communities, including communities involved in ecotourism (Swanepoel, Swanepoel and Smith, 2018). Therefore, when the industry of ecotourism expands, the economy of all those communities engaged in ecotourism is more likely to grow (Hsu, 2019). This is because more funds get accumulated by parks which later results in increased tax rates paid to the government. In countries such as Costa Rica and South Africa, the popularity of ecotourism led to the establishment of many national parks and reserves (Hsu, 2019; Swanepoel *et al.*, 2018). Based on tax revenues raised by these countries, it is believed that ecotourism is significant on growing the local economy of communities (Hsu, 2019; Swanepoel *et al.*, 2018; Walter, Regmi and Khanal, 2018). The majority of nature reserves are privately owned and as a result, their main aim is to make profit that will in turn benefit themselves only (Korth, 2000). Although, some of these privately-owned reserves in South Africa pay taxes, there is still little effect on the local economy of communities (Giampiccoli, 2015). Ecotourism is essential for employment creation and this potential could and

should also work in favour of achieving the zero-hunger goal of sustainable development (Swanepoel, Swanepoel and Smith, 2018).

The provision of sustainable education for communities engaged in ecotourism should subsequently be ensured (Giampiccoli, 2015; Mosammam *et al.*, 2018). Education is known to be one of the keys to development therefore, ecotourism should provide sustainable education that could assist in terms of improving the standards of living of the communities (Giampiccoli, 2015). Through education, communities can learn various ways to engage in ecotourism in order to start up local businesses that would attract tourists for the purpose of community development as well as self-development (Adom, 2019). The communities could develop various skills that are directly linked to tourism such as crafting, running restaurants and other indigenous skills for their development and livelihoods (Adom, 2019). On the same hand, the community members who are capable of running sustainable businesses, could benefit from profit they generate from local businesses in order to improve their standards of living. Ecotourism should also provide education on how natural resources could be utilised without any form of waste in order to ensure that they meet the current needs without compromising those of the future generation (Arsic, Nikolic and Zivkovic, 2017). The benefits coming with the freshness and the nourishing education practices of travel are inimitable, and these benefits could be improved through the education provided by ecotourism (Ma, Cai *et al.*, 2019; Ma, Yin *et al.*, 2019). Local communities engaged in ecotourism should benefit educationally from tourists as it is believed that learning is an everyday activity which could still happen through meeting new people (Ma, Cai *et al.*, 2019; Ma, Yin *et al.*, 2019). Ecotourism should allow local communities to submerge themselves into the values and principles of other people and leave long-lasting impressions that are not easily forgettable (Ma, Cai *et al.*, 2019; Ma, Yin *et al.*, 2019).

Ecotourism is labour-intensive in that most of its activities are suited for underprivileged individuals, women as well as young people, and it enables people to submerge themselves into cultures and other people's lifestyles (Mtapuri and Giampiccoli, 2019). The legacy of apartheid in South Africa covered with slow economic growth has visibly entrenched structural inequality therefore, ecotourism should be able to assist in the fight against inequity and inequality among participating communities (Mbaiwa, 2018; Mthembu, 2012). Ecotourism has the potential to generate funds from foreign exchange remunerations (Das and Chaterjee, 2015). In South Africa, ecotourism has been the biggest source of foreign exchange remunerations that are essentially for community development.

Robust foreign exchange remunerations usually work as an indicator of fortunate profitable environments (Meluddi and Pulina, 2016). The remunerations also have a direct effect on the economy of communities engaged in ecotourism (Walter, Regmi and Khanal, 2018). It serves as an important instrument required for helping fight the hunger faced by the communities. Foreign exchange remunerations make it easier for the export and import activities to be flexible (Meluddi and Pulina, 2016). In other words, the more the country's foreign exchange remunerations, the easier it is to export and import goods and services that would in turn assist communities to have a good quality life and help in terms of poverty alleviation. It is argued that the foreign exchange remunerations help boost and positively influence the capital flow in the country (Walter *et al.*, 2018). Seemingly, there are also vital political implications because politicians may counter by suggesting reduction in the country's taxes and on the same hand, enacting for import responsibilities and shares intended to safeguard the country's economy (Meluddi and Pulina, 2016; Walter, Regmi, and Khanal, 2018). As part of community development, ecotourism can assist in terms of contributing towards good quality health facilities that will provide good quality health care to all communities, including those that are engaged in ecotourism (Meluddi and Pulina, 2016). Although ecotourism demonstrates so much development potential, it was criticised for stressing the environment, precisely when not handled appropriately in most communities where it is undertaken (Mbaiwa, 2018).

### **3. PRINCIPLES AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

The paper adopted the Sustainable Development Theory which was introduced to organise principles that will be suitable in meeting people's basic needs and concurrently sustaining the natural environment (Ross, 2015). The Sustainable Development Theory was entrenched in the most primitive ideas about sustainable forest management and twentieth-century environmental concerns. Accordingly, the first principle of the theory states that there should be harmony between the development and the environment (Ross, 2015). The theory is supported by the paper by emphasising the realisation that, during the practice of ecotourism, the socio-economic well-being of local communities should not be neglected. On the contrary, there should be stewardship of the environment for the purpose of achieving sustainable community development. The second principle of the sustainable development theory puts emphasis on the need to assimilate social with environmental issues into choices that form economic and social development whether made by private or public division (Ross, 2015). The theory

supports the need to meet all local communities' basic needs with caution for the purposes of reserving some natural resources for the future generation (Ross, 2015). In addition, the theory emphasises the need to maintain and improve life through the adoption of the principle of equal distribution of means and material resources.

The third principle of the Sustainable Development Theory calls for a need to create equal opportunities for everyone (Ocampo, Ebisa, Ombe and Escoto, 2018). This paper also takes into account the problem of inequality in communities engaged in ecotourism. It is one of the principles of the theory of sustainable development to ensure that the cultural heritage of communities is protected and or conserved (Ocampo, Ebisa *et al.*, 2018). As a result, this paper does not overlook the traditional and cultural lifestyle of communities engaged in ecotourism. The fifth principle of the theory calls for a need to ensure the protection of human resources because it is believed that the human resources are significant in saving the earth (Ocampo, Ebisa *et al.*, 2018). This paper has, in most parts, discussed the need to consider the socio-economic wellbeing of communities engaged in ecotourism. Therefore, this paper seeks to discuss the socio-economic status of communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa in calling for a need for sustainable community development.

#### **4. ECOTOURISM AND COMMUNITIES' SOCIO-ECONOMIC STATUS: WORKING TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

The socio-economic status of the majority of communities engaged in ecotourism in South Africa does not complement the goals of sustainable community development such as alleviating poverty, having good quality education, ensuring gender equality, ensuring skills development and reducing hunger, among others. This section, therefore, discusses the socio-economic status of communities engaged in ecotourism with the hope of demonstrating that there is a need for sustainable community development. The section is arranged in subsections as follows:

##### **4.1 Inadequacy of necessarily skills**

It is one of the goals of sustainable development to ensure that all communities have adequate skills required in what they engage in. However, lack of skills remains a challenge in most of the communities engaged in ecotourism (Kruger

and Steyn, 2019). This has escalated to a point where most people in those communities engaged in ecotourism are unable to fill in different job positions, which also has a negative effect on sustainable community development. The current generations are mostly striving to work towards meeting their basic needs without even thinking for the future generation. Around 2014, about 8% of employers plotted difficulties of filling many job vacancies due to the inadequacy of necessarily skills (Kruger and Steyn, 2019). The difficulties went on and increased from 8% to 31% in 2019 (Kruger and Steyn, 2019). The data has served as evidence behind the heightened levels of lack of skills that the majority of communities engaged in ecotourism are faced with (Kruger and Steyn, 2019). With unemployment rising among all communities, including those that are involved in ecotourism, it becomes difficult for poverty to be alleviated; instead, it rises to a high level and delays the process of attaining sustainable community development (Sunderland, Roe, Blomieg, Day and Yuliani, 2018; Jordaan and Barry, 2009). Majority of the youth in the communities engaged in ecotourism are faced with high instances of poverty which hinder a majority of them from pursuing their education, be it primary, secondary and or tertiary (Sunderland *et al.*, 2018). This shows a difficulty in terms of the skills improvement and occupation success among a majority of the youth, which in turn, adversely affects sustainable community development (Sunderland *et al.*, 2018).

## 4.2 Inequity and Inequality

South Africa is regarded as one of the countries which are mostly dominated by inequity and inequality (Kepe, 2016; Shocking, 2015). Communities engaged in ecotourism are mostly affected by the whole country's issue of inequality. This inequality involves several dimensions coupled with some features such as class distinction and local disparity supplementing the apparent ethnic component (Kirsten, Wordsworth and Plessis, 2017; Gelderblom, 2006). The Employment Equity Act (EEA) no. 55 of 1998 was formulated to help in ensuring that quality and equity in employment is observed in South Africa (Kepe, 2016; Williams, 2009). However, the EEA was criticised for owing political imperatives by which it drove its priorities inputs and outcomes (Williams, 2009). The goal of sustainable development, which is to ensure equity and equality for all, is not realised in a majority of the communities engaged ecotourism in South Africa. The communities are still faced with a challenge to address the imbalances brought by post-apartheid effects in workplaces (Wilson and Letsosa, 2014). Practically, there are still employees discriminated based on gender and race in workplaces and during eco-tours. Issues of gender equality continue to be a

challenge in most communities involved in ecotourism activities (Rawatlal, Pillay and Kliewer, 2015; Kepe, 2016). In some cases, women are deprived of certain jobs opportunities due to the thought that they are sensitive and stereotyped for specific positions. As a result, it becomes a complex process to alleviate poverty and achieve sustainable community development if the majority of women are not involved (Simoes and Santos, 2014).

### **4.3 Ineffective and Inefficient agricultural extension system**

One of the goals of sustainable development is to reduce hunger and starvation among community members (Van Loeper, Musango, Brent and Drimie, 2016). Subsistence farming in the form of both crop and livestock farming are regarded as other ways to help in fighting against hunger communities that are engaged in ecotourism (Fedele, Locatelli and Djoudi, 2017). Therefore, communities need an effective and efficient extension system to help in improving subsistence farming (Dube *et al.*, 2018). This will also advance the production system and keenness. It is believed that the agricultural development of communities involved in ecotourism needs substantial hardwork that could improve the value of the agricultural system (Dube *et al.*, 2018). The main aim of agricultural extension service in communities where ecotourism is practiced should not only be to increase food manufacturing and spreading the benefits of enhanced farming systems extensively. It should also be to increase the production of whole food and rescuing the current generation from poverty while taking into consideration the standards of living of the future generation (Dube *et al.*, 2018; Van Loeper *et al.*, 2016). According to Dube *et al.* (2018), “agricultural extension and advisory services encompass systems and mechanisms designed to build and strengthen the capacity of farmers to produce more efficiently”. This is achieved by improving the provision and contact to appropriate and significant data together with appropriate technical skills (Van Loeper *et al.*, 2016). Most communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa do not have effective and efficient agricultural systems (Dube *et al.*, 2018). This does not give out any advantage to sustainable development due to a lack of training programmes and better management to assist in addressing diverse communities’ difficulties (Dube *et al.*, 2018). Seemingly, the propensity to make use of the top-down methods hinders the extension structure from having an important influence. This is believed to be providing a discouragement to agriculturalists’ communities as well as to those they are supplying food to (Dube *et al.*, 2018).

#### **4.4 Ill-health and Illiteracy**

Most communities involved in ecotourism in South Africa are vulnerable to poverty and inequality as a result of their health and education status (Rawatlal, Pillay and Kliwer, 2015). They are faced with high percentages of dangerous and contagious diseases such as the Human Immune Virus (HIV), Malaria and Tuberculosis (TB), among others (Van de Poel *et al.*, 2008). Child deaths, mostly as a result of undernourishment as well as contagious diseases, are also among the challenges faced by these communities (Lippman, Leslie and Kahn, 2018; Van de Poel *et al.*, 2008). It is against the goal of sustainable development for communities to be faced with ill-health as it hopes for good health for everyone (Kirsten, Wordsworth and Plessis, 2017). However, some community members involved in ecotourism are unable to work due to their ill-health (Rawatlal *et al.*, 2015). This leaves them with no choice but to lose the income often necessary for a decent standard of living (Lippman *et al.*, 2018). Sustainable development also seeks to reduce illiteracy among communities (Meluddi and Pulina, 2016). Ecotourism is said to provide education to tourists and community members participating during eco-tours (Merino, 2018). Practically, most communities involved in ecotourism still have high rates of illiteracy and so, the absence of education and skills affect their efforts to alleviate poverty (Rawatlal *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, they are unable to acquire useful information, learn and constructively use knowledge for self-development (Zhou and Liu, 2019).

Generally, the socio-economic status of the majority of communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa is unacceptable because they are unable to sustain themselves. Most communities are still far from reaching the zero-hunger goal of sustainable development. Most communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa do not have effective and efficient agricultural systems. This neither yields any benefit nor complements the sustainable development goals. The quality of education in such communities remains poor and their level of poverty remains high. Overall, the issues of inequity and inequality are still high in the communities engaged in ecotourism.

#### **5. WAY FORWARD**

The paper recommends that private companies involved in ecotourism in South Africa should work together with the government and different communities in ensuring the sustainable development of involved communities. Training programmes and better management should be provided to communities to assist in responding to and addressing diverse rural development problems. Ecotourism

events should ensure that they create platforms for local communities to benefit educationally and financially from tourists as it is believed that learning is an everyday activity which could still happen through meeting new people. Furthermore, public and private institutions should work together with communities engaged in ecotourism and the nature reserves to ensure that participating local communities are able to start local businesses that would attract tourists for the purpose of their development.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

This paper hoped to discuss the socio-economic status of communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa and also set out to call for a need for sustainable community development. Firstly, the paper discussed how ecotourism can be used as a mechanism for alleviating poverty, ensuring skills development, gender equity, good quality education, good health and reducing hunger, among issues. Seemingly, if well approached, ecotourism has the potential to effectively address a number of socio-economic challenges within its communities. Secondly, the paper discussed the principles and the theoretical framework of sustainable community development through the lense of the Sustainable Development Theory. The principles provided a practical understanding on how ecotourism can be used for community development purposes. Thirdly, the socio-economic status of communities engaged in ecotourism was discussed, which revealed the high levels of poverty, equity and inequality, ill-health and lack of skills, among factors. Generally, the paper revealed that South Africa's ecotourism does not fulfil the aspirations of sustainable community development which include: poverty alleviation, skills development, provision of quality health and education as well as improving gender equality. Therefore, the paper theoretically concludes that the socio-economic statuses of communities practicing ecotourism in South Africa do not complement the goals of sustainable community development.

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