

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Local Communities' Participations and Involvements in the Tourism Sector: Practices and Challenges in Major Tourist Destinations of Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia

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Abstract

Local people's participations and involvements are the key path to sustainable tourism development when they are treated as the basic inputs and products in the decision-making processes of tourism activities. Though several studies attempted to study local people's participations in tourism development, they overlooked the challenges that hinder local people's participations in the stated sector. Thus, this study investigated the participations and involvements of local people in the tourism sector with particular emphasis on practices, and challenges in major tourist destinations of the Amhara region. In order to achieve the objective of the study, critical ethnographic design with qualitative research approach was employed. Based on this, four tourist destinations namely, Gondar city, Lalibela and its surroundings, Simien Mountains National Park, and Tana Monasteries and Tis Abay falls were included using purposive sampling technique. In-depth interview, key informant interview, and focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to collect the data. Finally, the collected data were analyzed thematically. The findings indicate that many challenges destruct the participations of local communities in tourism activities such as institutional barriers, political affiliations, the reluctance of local officials in disseminating tourist information, lack of strong coordination among stakeholders, power disparities, political unrest (state of emergency declared for a year in the year 2017), and mistrust of authorities on the participations of local people. It can be, as a result, deduced that the local communities are mostly excluded from the decision-making processes of tourism development. Thus, the paper tries to show possible implications if there will be no involvements of local people in development inducing tourism sector

Keywords: Tourism, Community Participation, Amhara Region

Introduction

In recent years, initiatives and different interventions have been made by both governmental and non-governmental organizations, scholars, and local administrators so as to enhance the genuine participations and involvements of local communities in tourism sector. The active participations of local people have been recognized and acknowledged as the key path to sustainable development in general and local tourism development success in particular. This, however, would be possible if the local people are the primary beneficiaries of the tourism (Ying and Zhou, 2007).

Despite the initiatives and efforts to include the participations of the grassroots in the process of tourism development, it is still not new to see local people excluded from tourism activities where major actions are usually undertaken by local officials, culture-tour-

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ism professionals, district administrators and other private-owned enterprises. So far, local communities have been misplaced, even marginalized from tourism planning and decision-making process. But, this challenge is very prominent in low-income countries, including Ethiopia (Chili and Ngxongo, 2017). Moreover, Marzuki (2008) clearly explained that bureaucratic processes of government authorities and the respective municipalities in the tourist destinations are categorized as amongst the major problems that highly hinder local people's participation in the development of the tourism industry (Azizan, 2008).

In the same vein, Tosum (2000) described that the participation of local communities in the tourism sector has different constraints such as paternalism, 'racism', clientelism, lack of experts and absence of adequate budget accompanied by structural problems, particularly in developing nations which in turn resulted in further troubles for the residents. He added that the imbalance of power of tourism authorities at local, zonal, regional and national levels are also the most participation hindering factors of the local communities in tourism planning and development processes (Tosum 2000).

Furthermore, previously, in Ethiopia, many studies were conducted on the participations of local people in the tourism sector. Nevertheless, this area still needs further investigations to a better understanding of the challenges of community participations and involvements in tourism development. Among others, Messele (2010) examined a case study research in Axum city entitled Community Participation in Tourism Development in Tigray. He mainly addressed the role of local communities' participation in tourism development and the extent of local people's participations in tourism. Later on, in the same region, Tewodros (2015) studied Community Participation and Involvement in Tourism. In his case study, Tewodros assessed the level of participation of the local people and the contribution of local people's participation in the tourism sector. Studies were focused on the level of local people participation and their contributions in the tourism sector in particular for sustainable development in general.

The other study was conducted by Amare and Biruk (2019) on Community Participation in Tourism Development as a Tool to Foster Sustainable Land and Resource Use Practices of Bale Mountains National Park. They studied the nature, extent and dynamics of local communities' participation in the tourism sector and concluded that participation is the key to sustainable land use and practice.

More importantly, Endalkachew et.al (2018) conducted on Challenges of Tourism Destination Development in the Amhara Regional State. The main focus of their study was identifying the major challenges hampering destination development in Amhara Regional State, but not the challenges of local communities' participation in tourism activities. In terms of scope, their study was too general that focused on destination challenges in the region.

Similarly, Biruk (2012) studied the Challenges and Opportunities of Tourism Development in Gondar city. The study revealed that limited participation of the local people, destruction of both tangible and intangible heritages, and the concentration of tourism benefits to few individuals. Likewise, they discussed the absence of quality tourism products and services, conflict of interests and ownerships, and consumerism behavior of visitors. Moreover, the study unveils that the limited participation of local people is one of the challenges for tourism development. It implies that the study did not address the basic reasons that hamper the participation of local people in tourism.

All the studies mentioned above overlooked the main challenges of the community in

terms of participating of the local communities in tourism development. Consequently, most of them stated the limited participation of local people was one of the key challenges for tourism development. Conversely, this study examined the current practices and hindrances that destruct local people's participation in the tourism activities in the Amhara region with particular reference to tourist destinations, Gondar city, Tana Monasteries and Tis Abay falls, the Simien Mountains National Park and Lalibela town.

Study sites

Amhara Region has many tourist attraction sites, however, for the sake of time and financial issues, this research was delimited on major tourist destination areas. Thus, the study was conducted to investigate local communities' participations and involvements in the tourism sector of Gondar city, Lalibela, Simien Mountains National Park, and Tana Monasteries and Tis Abay falls.

Materials and Methods

Research design

This study employed critical ethnographic design with qualitative approach integrates the perspectives of the people being studied and the researchers during the data collection and analysis process. Thus, in the analysis section of the study, both emic and etic views were analyzed jointly. Moreover, this design helps the researcher to see the connections between the observed situation and the real situation (Sharma and Sarkar, 2019). The rationale for using this approach is that it allows person-to-person discussion in order to increase people's insight, thought, feelings and perceptions on the issue being studied. Not only this, but also its flexibility enables to see the non-verbal language behavior of the communities (Kitzinger, 1995; Creswell, 2003).

In the context of this research, the researcher found qualitative research very sound since it examines the current practices and challenges that hamper the participations of local people in the tourism sector. In other words, practices and challenges can be very thick and rich when using qualitative method.

Sampling technique

Determining the sample size in qualitative research is depends on the resource, time available and study objectives. Purposive sampling, as part of the sampling techniques in qualitative research, is often determined on the basis of theoretical saturation (Mack et.al, 2005).

In this study, the researcher also employed purposive sampling. In this regard, the ANRSCTB² has identified four major tourist destinations namely Simien Mountains National Park, Gondar, Tana Monasteries and Tis Abay falls, and Lalibela (ANRSCTB, 2011). From these tourist destinations, Simien Mountains National Park, Gondar city, Lake Tana Monastries and Tise Abay Falls, and Lalibela town and its surrounding were selected using purposive sampling because these sites have a relatively high flow of tourists. Besides, the sites were assumed that they played a better contribution to the economic growth of the region in particular and the country at large.

² Amhara National Regional State Culture and Tourism Bureau

The sources of data for this study were the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Amhara Regional Culture and Tourism Bureau, Zone and Woreda³ Culture and Tourism Offices, Zone and Woreda Administrative Offices, Police Offices/Centers, Tourist Information Centers, Tourism Guide Associations, Tour and Travel Agents/Operators, major hotels/restaurants, cook associations, scouts, and the local communities.

Similarly, in selecting the participants of the study, purposive sampling technique was employed. The justification that this sampling technique was used is that it was found convenient to select the target groups who have extensive knowledge, experiences and direct involvement in the tourism sector. Likewise, households living within the radius of one kilometer nearby the sites as target households were found convenient to be the participants using this sampling technique.

Data collection methods

In-depth interview: An in-depth interview helps the researcher to come up with more detailed information about the issues being studied and gives a relaxed atmosphere (Boyce and Neale, 2006). Besides, Creswell (2003) indicates this data collection method allows the researcher to control the line of questioning.

Bearing this in mind, the researcher employed in-depth interview in order to achieve the principal objective of the study. It was conducted with local community members living in and around tourist destinations. The researcher used this data collection method as it helps to explore the experiences, practices and perspectives of the local communities from their points of view. A total of 20 interviewees were recruited for the data collection. In doing so, five interviewees from each study site were selected in order to manage the interview session effectively and this number is also highly recommended in qualitative research when there is a homogenous population. Especially, concerning tourism practices and the challenges that hinder the participations of local communities in the tourism sector, interviewees were asked open-ended questions. During the interview session, the local language (Amharic) was used.

Key Informant Interview: Key informant interview was also the tool used in the study. Hence, interview was conducted with culture-tourism officers, guides, church administrators, individuals from the tourist information center, individuals from tour guide associations and local service providers were interviewed. In doing so, in each site 12 key informants were interviewed.

In doing so, in each site 12 key informants were selected which means two key informants from each target group. Generally, these informants were asked open-ended questions using Amharic language.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): To collect the data, FGDs was used as one of the instruments. As a result, it was conducted with guides, culture and tourism officers, tour and travel agents, chairpersons of car rental association, chairpersons of cook association, religious fathers, hotels, relevant NGOs, police offices and from the community in the study sites. There were, thus, sixteen groups in conducting the discussions. The discussions were conducted with four groups from each site among the sixteen groups. The entire (16) groups contained eight members in doing so. Amharic language was, consequently, used in conducting it.

³ It is to mean district, the lowest unit under zonal administration

Results and Discussion

With regard to the study areas (tourists destinations of Amhara National Regional State), the researcher has identified the current tourism practices and major challenges such as institutional barriers, political affiliation, the reluctance of local officials in disseminating tourist information for local people, lack of strong coordination among stakeholders, power disparities, and mistrust of authorities on the participations and involvements of local people (mainly the woreda micro and small enterprise office, the woreda administration, and tourism office).

For the last decades, several attempts have made a great dedication towards how to realize sustainable tourism development in the world (Jamal and Stronza, 2009). From this on, there was a call for partnership and cooperation among different tourism stakeholders ranging from local to national and international levels that tried to incorporate the diverse needs, interests, and knowledge of these stakeholders in order to have a common understanding of tourism development (Brohman, 1996). In particular, special attention was given to the importance of communities' participation and involvement so as to achieve sustainable tourism development successfully (Scheyvens 2003). On the ground that local communities are highly affected by the growth of the tourism industry positively or negatively (Kim, et.al, 2014).

Regardless of this, it is common to see the rare participation of local communities in tourism activities, including planning and implementation. Especially, this problem is very prominent in Ethiopia whereby the top officials usually take the lion's share in the decision-making process of tourism development. On the other hand, the local communities, mostly excluded from the active involvements of the tourism sector.

The participations and involvements of local people in tourism activities: current practices and barriers

So far, when the researcher forwarded a question concerning the current practices of tourism in the tourism sector and the participations of local people in the purposefully selected research sites, those communities who are living in and around tourist destination areas described the situation in the following manner:

... Currently, tourism activities in our tourist area are decreasing as compared to those seasons that means from June to mid-September. The main reason for the decreasing of tourist flow during this time is because of Tis Abay waterfall will be decreased, while between June and until mid of September the waterfall will be increased (FI⁴, 05/02/2017).

Based on the above explanation of female interviewees, the number of both local and international tourists, and tourism-related activities are very proportional to the type of seasons. Therefore, these seasons are among the limiting factors for the flow of local, and international visitors. However, the seasonal factor is not the major challenge that edges the participations and involvements of local people from local tourism economies, it may affect the number of visitors either negatively, or positively. Instead, the institutional factors largely influence the participations of people in this sector.

4 Female interviewee

Similarly, interviewees (tour guides) from Gondar city and the Simien Mountains National Park also reported that the political unrest that has been happening in the last year massively affected the tourism practices in the destinations. A male interviewee at Gondar city added that not only the political unrest between the government, and the people, but also the “State of Emergency” declared by the government of the country has adversely influenced the movement of tourists in Simien Mountains National Park, and Gondar city largely.

In addition to this, study participants briefly expressed the current tourism practices and the major challenges facing them especially financial limitation to produce local products for tourists in the following manner:

... In order to produce different local tourism products and to sell them to tourists, we do not have enough capital to do so. It is due to the poor approachability of the woreda tourism officials in particular and the government (local to regional levels) in general for community-based tourism. Especially, tourism offices, overlooked the prominent role of communities’ active participations and involvements in realizing sustainable tourism development. Not only for local products but also they did not give any respect for the tourism service that we are trying to provide for tourists (MKI1⁵, 07/02/2017).

Similarly, the respective woreda culture and tourism officials, however, blame both the regional and federal governments as follow:

We repeatedly asked the regional and federal governments to release us the budget for our youths so as to run their businesses. But, they did not provide us the required startup money. Consequently, local youths are complaining every year comes. The woreda micro and small enterprise office is also responsible for such failure (CTO⁶, 07/02/2018).

Contrary to the onions of culture and tourism officials, female and male key informants living in and around Tis Abay waterfall emotionally described their feelings about tourism practices and the low level of local people’s participations and involvements in the tourism sector in the following manner:

... In fact, by considering the poor tourism activities and the low level of people’s involvements in the tourism sector, UNDP has given us good training aimed at improving our skills, experiences, and knowledge for local tourism development. This organization has also brought financial support for us to start a business here in the tourist destination area (Blue Nile Waterfall). Sadly, however, those “*curse*”⁷ officials have hijacked evilly that money without any legal base. In doing so, many times, we (local people) complained against their unlawful actions for the woreda administration and the woreda tourism office, but their responses were similar to what others did in the past (FI1 and MI2, 05/02/2017).

Furthermore, informants from the same site (Tis Abay waterfall) added their grievances over the woreda micro and small enterprise officers in such a way:

5 Male key informant

6 Culture and tourism officials, Tis Abay waterfall

7 Cursed officials, according to the research informants, include woreda and kebele administrators, tourism officers people working in the Micro and Small Enterprises Office and other bureaucrats in the tourist destinations.

Indeed, the micro and small enterprises officers told us to organize ourselves (the so-called one-to-five arrangements) and they were promised to release the budget for the group. However, still, we do not have money for the group to start the anticipated business. As a result of such a response from the government, now we are providing only coffee-tea service and bread and sometimes biscuit for tourists. We could not satisfy those tourists who need other services, for instance, food, beverage, and packed water (FK11⁸ , 05/02/2017).

By the same token, a male interviewee at the Tis Abay waterfall whose age 40 has also explained the situation in this way:

I badly asked the woreda tourism office and, micro and small enterprise office so as to offer me a workplace to start a tourism service. But, all of the officers denied my request and they also joked with me by saying “መሬት ርዕሰ-መስተዳድሩ ይስጥህ” meaning that let the President of Amhara National and Regional State give you the land. Even, they strongly said that “we will never give land to rural people who do not have more than 2000 ETB⁹. After many times, the woreda micro and small enterprise office offered me the land, but I do not have money to build the house and to produce local tourism artifacts. Of course, we do have the unlimited inspiration to contribute a lot to the growth of the tourism sector, specifically by making local products including jewelry and cloth using the traditional weaving industry (MI¹⁰2, 05/02/2017).

As well, one of the guides working in Gondar city blamed the culture and tourism office in this fashion:

I believe that the low level of people’s participations and involvements in tourism development is mainly results from the lack of information. Here, the office (culture and tourism) should have played their role in disseminating the required information (MI¹¹ , 10/02/2017).

In like manner, the woreda culture and tourism officers from Semien Mountains National Park and Tis Abay waterfall asserted that lack of tourism facilities such as road, hotel, motel, car parking, recreation centers, shop and clean water which inspire both local and international tourists to stay there. This in turn negatively affects the participations and involvements of local communities in tourism activities.

Related to this, Dogra and Gupta (2012) in their study found that many challenges exist in the tourist destinations which influence the people in the process of tourism participation and from these the most important is organizational barriers (Dogra and Gupta, 2012). Their finding is exceedingly linked with what the study informants thought on the topic of challenges that hamper the people’s contribution to the tourism economy.

In general, the researcher questioned interviewees (service providers) with regard to the main challenges, subsequently, they reported the major problems as institutional barriers, political affiliation, lack of tourist information for local people, lack of strong coordination among stakeholders, power disparities, lack of money, and mistrust of authorities on the participations and involvements of local people (mainly the woreda micro and small enterprise office, the woreda administration and tourism office).

8 Female key informant one

9 Ethiopian Birr

10 Male interviewee two

11 Male interviewee three

Above all, informants highly criticized the woreda government officials namely micro and small enterprises, the woreda tourism office, park management officers (mainly in the Simien Mountains National Park) and woreda/kebele administrators.

To begin with, under the micro and small enterprise office, informants expressed their grievances over the current tourism practices and the maladministration of woreda officials as mentioned below:

... There is a lack of tourism and business-oriented training, though they have given us some short-term training in the past, those given training were not outcome-based which could benefit the local people in the long run. These officials are not handy in empowering the poor people with financial provision. In addition to this, the absence of a workplace and other supports are other challenges that negatively affect the participations of local communities in tourism development. In addition, corruption is another hurtful problem which limits the participation of local people. To make it clear, there are some officers who favor their families, nearest relatives, friends, and neighbors in training or other tourism-related benefits. On the contrary, those poor people who are not able to pay for something will not be benefited from tourism development, including meetings, training, workplace, financial support and other incentives (MKI2¹², 10/02/2017).

The above speeches by key informants showed that there are many local people from the tourist destination areas of the Amhara National Regional State who are seriously seeking to participate and actively engage in tourism activities, but none of the woreda officials able to hear their complaints rather they continued to benefit their families, nearest relatives, friends and neighbors at the expense of the poorest people.

Similar to the above statement, a male interviewee from Tis Abay waterfall also expressed his grievance against those woreda officials:

... Let alone the funds from local government, the micro, and small enterprise office stifled our money what we funded by foreign organizations such as UNDP. The only thing that is left with us is a grievance. Imagine, when we tried to ask them for money they will consider us as complaints. Of course, we would like to produce souvenirs and sell them to tourists, but the woreda officials are not cooperative with us (MI2¹³, 05/02/2017).

In this regard, Sewunet (2017) in his review paper, *Challenges and Opportunities for Community-based Ecotourism Development in Ethiopia*, has also presented that lack of infrastructure and other facilities as major obstacles that impede the participations of local people in tourism development. However, Sewunet's review paper has only focused on community-based ecotourism initiatives in Ethiopia (Semien Mountains National Park, Adaba-Dodola, Wonchi Crater Lake and Adwa). So, other tourist destinations were not assessed in this review paper.

Opposing to the findings of this study concerning the high motivation of the people in the study areas, Cole (2006) in his research suggested that lack of understanding of the local people about tourism development is found to be the ultimate barrier to the meaningful participations of the communities. On the contrary, informants of this study have

12 Male key informant two

13 Male interview two

recognized the relevance of community participations for tourism development and complaining about institutional barriers largely the woreda micro and small enterprise, park management officials, tourism office and those kebele and woreda administrators.

With regard to the woreda tourism office, interviewees have articulated the following feelings:

... From the very beginning, they [tourism officials] do have lesser expectations concerning community-based tourism development compared to other sectors of the economy. They are very reluctant in disseminating relevant information to local communities and international tourists. This, in turn, resulted in discomfort among tourists. Failure to organize meetings, conferences, and discussions with community members regarding the use of community participations and involvements for sustainable tourism development is among the major limits under this office. That is a misunderstanding of the key role of people's participations in the development of the tourism sector. Furthermore, they [tourism officers] do not have any curiosity for locally produced goods in promoting them for the market. The woreda tourism officers also lacked a strong partnership with the local people and other stakeholders (MI2 and FKI¹⁴, 05/02/2017).

This scenario is very consistent with the findings of Tosum (2000) in that most of the time tourism authorities do not acknowledge the significant role of the host communities in the tourism development process. The very fragmented relation of tourism authorities with communities and their lack of knowledge about people's involvements in the tourism sector is also the overriding factors.

Moreover, poor attitudes of the tourism professionals and politicians towards the prominence of grassroots participations in the development process in general and in the tourism business, in particular, is another indistinguishable problem (Chili, 2017). In relation to moving towards tourism growth, these tourism professionals at the district level mainly assumed people-centered or participatory approach in tourism activities as irrelevant for tourism development and very backward at large (Tosum 2000).

Along with other offices that negatively affecting the participations of the people from the desired tourism development, informants also articulated their deep complaints about the woreda/kebele administrators as follow:

There is ignorance of local people in different administrative affairs including meetings and discussions on tourism planning, decision-making process, and policy-related agendas (MKIs¹⁵, 06/02/2017).

Likewise, Tosum (2006) in his study entitled Expected Nature of Community Participation in Tourism Development has pointed out that a high level of centralization of administrative bodies and domination of elites (Marzuki, 2008) impeded the local communities to play the leading role in tourism development. In the year 2000, Tosum also clearly explained this situation in such a way:

...The effect of this centralization restricts the influence of community-level groups in the planning process and the implementing plans. Under these circumstances, centralization has stifled popular participatory planning. It has also increased the verti-

14 Stands for female key informant

15 Male key informants, four

cal distance between planners and the broad mass of the population (Tosum, 2000).

The same is true in tourist destination areas of the Amhara region where the concerned officials impede the involvements of local communities in tourism activities; from planning to implementation.

Conclusion

Though local people's participations in tourism development plays a decisive role, its role has often been overlooked by local officials. Particularly, this problem was found to be evident in tourist destinations of the Amhara region, Gondar, Lalibela, Simien Mountains National Park and Tana Monasteries and Tis Abay falls. The results of the study show that there are limiting factors that hinder the participations and involvements of local people in the tourism sector which include the reluctance of tourism officials to disseminate timely information to local people, institutional barriers, misunderstanding and mistrust of local authorities on the participations and involvements of local people, lack of tourism facilities (for example in Simien Mountains National Park and Tis Abay Falls), failure of culture and tourism offices to organize meetings and discussions with local people on tourism planning, decision-making and policy-related matters, and lack of strong coordination among stakeholders.

It should be the time in which the local officials and representatives allow the local communities to engage in the decision-making process of tourism growth. In this regard, the decision-making may range from tourism planning right up to the implementation stage. The indigenous knowledge of the local communities living in and around the tourist destination areas should be integrated with the knowledge of those planners at the regional and federal levels. So far, tourist information should be disseminated to local people.

More importantly, as a participatory or people-centered approach is becoming the practical solution for development, so does sustainable tourism development. Local people's participations and involvements in tourism development should not be treated as supplementary to tourism development, instead, it should be taken as one of the core pillars. If so, those woreda officials should be aware that sustainable tourism development could not be achieved without the active participations and involvements of local communities. In addition, tourism professionals at all levels should also play the advocacy role to empower the residents in any tourism agenda whenever exists. To this end, tourism experts should provide capacity-building training for local communities.

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