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Approaches toward Community Participation Enhancement in Ecotourism

Thembinkosi Keith Gumede and Antonia Thandi Nzama

Abstract

A vast majority of scholarship share a similar view that collective participation of different stakeholders serves as a prerequisite for ecotourism sustainable development. Local community participation is considered to be an important pillar of ecotourism development as local communities are capable of influencing success or failure of ecotourism development projects. Socio-economic and socio-cultural well-being of local communities are crucial ingredients for maintaining rapport amongst stakeholders and sustaining ecotourism development. Despite being promulgated as a central pillar of ecotourism development, literature reveals that local communities have not been actively participating in planning and decision-making processes regarding ecotourism development. Adoption of Western-centric oriented participation frameworks by numerous state authorities coupled with lacking necessary skills have been identified as the main factors that hinder active participation of local communities in ecotourism development initiatives. It has therefore, been suggested that ecotourism destinations need to adopt and implement participatory approaches that suit their specific contexts and promote bottom-up ecotourism development procedures. Based on its potential for influencing review and amendment of existing tourism-related policies, a local community participation improvement model has been developed. The model is aimed at facilitating inclusive and active participation of all stakeholders in ecotourism development processes.

Keywords: Stakeholders, local community participation, neoliberalism, local community participation improvement model, ecotourism development

1. Introduction

Ecotourism as a concept and practical phenomenon became popular during 1980s resulting from its ecological and non-ecological benefits [1]. The phenomenon has been termed by Brechin, Wilshusen, Fortwangler and West ([2], p. 53) as 'pragmatic middle ground' resulting from its ability to concurrently stimulate ecological and non-ecological benefits to both the environment and local communities. By definition, ecological benefits are all the services rendered by natural environment within or adjacent to nature-based areas and they include: livestock fodder, fresh water, building material and herbs. While, non-ecological benefits encompass economic opportunities, employment opportunities, capacity building,

multiplier effect, development and growth derived from ecotourism activities [1]. Inevitably, some tourism activities engender numerous antagonistic effects that are incurred by natural resources and local communities [3, 4]. As a consequence, ecotourism has been considered to be a more efficient sub-set of the tourism industry based on its ability to promote nature conservation and well-being of local communities [5, 6]. However, there has been a lack of consensus regarding a generally acceptable definition of ecotourism [7]. Consequently, a range of definitions that have been informed by scholars' and practitioners' specific focus has been used to define ecotourism [8].

Amongst popular definitions, is the one that was coined by a Mexican Ecologist, Hector Cebellos-Lascurain, who defined ecotourism as traveling responsibly to relatively fragile destinations for the purpose of studying, admiring and enjoying natural landscapes, fauna and flora, and cultural resources of the adjacent local communities [9]. Having taken into consideration a cascade of social, ecological, cultural as well as economic adverse impacts that can be triggered by tourism activities within the environment and local communities [3, 4], a need for a revised and local community-oriented definitions arose. Thus, subsequent definitions of ecotourism such as those coined by Moran-Cahusac [10]; Sangpikul [11] describe ecotourism as traveling responsibly to nature-based areas to experience and learn about nature and its habitat while taking into account cultural and socio-economic needs of the local communities. Accordingly, local communities and their participation have become the cardinal components of ecotourism development as most eco-destinations are located within the marginalized areas characterized by limited monetary resource, incapacitation and lack of mechanisms necessary for ecotourism development [12–14]. As a result, involvement of local communities in ecotourism development activities has been considered as a quantum leap by numerous tourism destinations [15]. It had been envisaged that involving local communities in ecotourism activities could assist in strengthening relationships between nature-based areas' authorities and locals while sustaining ecotourism development. Despite being promulgated as a lifeblood of ecotourism development and a means through which Sustainable Development Goals-2030 could be achieved [16], local community participation in development endeavors including ecotourism has been very limited, if not lacking, in many parts of the world [17]. Against this backdrop, the authors have developed a model by which local community participation in ecotourism could be enhanced.

2. Theoretical underpinning

As a sub-set of a broad modern-day international tourism industry, in many ways, the emergence and development of ecotourism is embedded within a globalized neoliberalism economic ideology [18]. The ideology is subsumed within a dominant logic of revenue accumulation and advocating market efficiency, promotion of material growth, minimal state interference and commodification of natural resources as a means for alleviating poverty and facilitating economic growth [18–20]. Accordingly, neoliberalism is defined by Fletcher [21] as a 'political ideology that advocates capitalist market system which is characterized by political and ideological antagonism towards state business regulation'. As a consequence, the emergence and implementation of neoliberalism in many parts of the world had triggered staging and commodification of natural resources for tourism and revenue generation purposes [22]. Staging and commodification of natural resources has been termed by McCarthy and Prudham ([22], p. 275); Duffy [23] as the 'neoliberalisation of nature'. This refers to a process whereby

natural resources are increasingly subjected to market-oriented management and development systems. During this process, natural resources such as distinct environments, fauna and flora and their habitats are staged to entertain visitors [23]. In essence, natural resources have been used as a means by which neoliberalism, through ecotourism has been subtly promoted for the past four decades. In attempt to protect natural resources from potential extinction, numerous privately-owned nature-based areas adopted fortress conservation system. This system promotes intensive management of protected areas (PAs) with the aim of maintaining security and safety of natural resources by which potential tourists' desire to explore might be spurred [1]. However, fortress conservation instigated extensive tensions between local communities and PAs' management as former had been denied access to a land that at some stage had belonged to their forefathers [24]. In attempt to mitigate tensions between these parties, a vast majority of privately-owned corporations including nature-based areas redirected their focus from absolute fortress conservation toward promoting community development initiatives [23]. Notwithstanding, critics of neoliberalism maintain that the ideology remains a strategy by which state agencies, conservation organizations and private enterprises accumulate monetary gains through staging natural resources for tourism purposes while denying locals a voice in decision-making processes regarding ecotourism development [25].

3. Literature review

3.1 Stakeholders involved in ecotourism

Development, success and sustainability of ecotourism hinge mainly upon active participation of a variety of stakeholders who play different roles depending on their capacity, type of ecotourism and necessary level of participation [18, 26–28]. In the context of ecotourism, stakeholders can be understood as all those parties or actors representing similar or divergent interests but working collaboratively toward the success of ecotourism project [29, 30]. Based on their unique roles and level of commitment, stakeholders are capable of influencing the success of ecotourism development activities [31]. There is an array of stakeholders involved in ecotourism development, and they range from public sector, private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), tourism operators, tourism sites' management, academic researchers and local communities [26, 32], and they can be categorized into primary and secondary segments [29]. The former refers to those who provide essential support without which ecotourism development could not take place, and they include: local communities, tourists, tourism operators, ecotourism sites' management, public and private sectors [29]. The latter comprises those who influence the operationalization of ecotourism development initiatives but do not qualify to be considered as interest groups, and these include: NGOs, community tourism committees/organizations as well as academic researchers [29]. As the preceding text highlights, each stakeholder plays a unique role in ecotourism development process. Government institutions (referred to here as public sector) are responsible for administering consultative processes through which development and enactment of policies and strategies reflecting aspirations and interests of the public concerning ecotourism development is ensured [33]. However, each state adopts and enact its unique policies and strategies meant to facilitate ecotourism development processes within the boundaries of their countries. This is normally done in accordance with the rules and regulations stipulated by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

Established during 1975, the UNWTO is the international agency entrusted with the responsibility to ensure that responsible, sustainable and universally acceptable tourism activities are promoted [34]. The private sector plays a significant role as it provides financial assistance needed by most developing countries in facilitating ecotourism development projects [26]. NGOs have also been playing a crucial role in ecotourism development through their interventions in addressing institutional and financial constraints that may hinder sustainability of ecotourism development programmes. Subsequently, ecotourism sites where NGOs are actively involved have been better managed compared to those that are solely state-owned [35]. Ecotourism operators play a major role as they ensure that the demands and needs of tourists outside the boundaries of ecotourism sites are met. For example, they provide accommodation and hospitality services to ensure that tourists have access to proper food, beverage, entertainment and comfortable rest [36]. Ecotourism sites bear a responsibility for ensuring that tourists' quest for studying, experiencing, enjoying and admiring natural resources while considering the socio-economic and socio-cultural well-being of the local communities is satisfied [37]. Tourists form an integral component of ecotourism development as they purchase the services and consume the products offered within and outside the boundaries of ecotourism sites [38]. Academic researchers gather useful data in influencing decision-making regarding review of existing and enactment of new policies by which proper management and sustainability of ecotourism can be facilitated [26]. Local communities are considered to be one of the key stakeholders in ecotourism development process. Meng, Jun and Zhengzheng [39] uphold cogently that it could be a mirage to achieve ecotourism overall objectives if community members are excluded from participating in ecotourism development programmes. Accordingly, the concept 'community participation' has emerged and became popular as it has been considered by the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) as one of the essential elements and principles of ecotourism development ([40], p. 30; [21], p. 269). Likewise, numerous government policy documents regard community participation as an essential pillar with which Sustainable Development Goals-2030 can be achieved [41].

In the context of ecotourism, community participation refers to a process whereby local residents are voluntarily engaged or involved in ecotourism development initiatives undertaken within the vicinity of their communities [14, 42]. In the process of participation, local communities are expected to take full responsibility during planning and management processes regarding ecotourism development [43]. Garrod [44] describes participation of local communities in planning and management as a process whereby locals are provided with a platform for sharing their views during conceptualization and decision-making phases of ecotourism development project. Participation of local communities in ecotourism development processes may result into accessing opportunities such as self-governance and working collaboratively with other stakeholders in planning and management process, especially on issues affecting their well-being [14, 45]. Local community well-being is defined by Eshun, Adjei and Baah ([46], p. 4) as 'the totality of efforts towards social resilience of local residents inhabiting communities adjacent to ecotourism sites through minimal external control and provisioning of alternative livelihood strategies'. Consideration of local community well-being in ecotourism development has been triggered mainly by possible adversity from socio-economic and socio-cultural impacts of ecotourism activities [40]. Accordingly, Nkemngu [47] argues cogently that issues of community well-being are deeply embedded within the social exchange theory, which maintains that local communities tend to trade their support for projects in exchange for benefits that they stand to gain from ecotourism development activities. As identified by Garrod [44], there are at least

five major indicators for successful community participation in ecotourism, and are illustrated in **Figure 1** and discussed in the subsequent writing.

Figure 1 illustrates that there is a need for a strong leadership during participatory planning process as different stakeholders may have different views, motives, preferences and objectives based on their expectations from ecotourism development project. For example, those who own accommodation and hospitality facilities may wish to host more visitors compared to ecotourism sites' managers who may want to regulate the number of visitors resulting from potential adverse impacts on natural resources due to ecotourism activities. In order to neutralize possible contrasting views and conflict of interest, a strong and assertive leadership is required for making resolute decisions that could amicably settle potential dispute while facilitating empowerment amongst stakeholders. Empowerment can be understood as the effort of ensuring that all stakeholders including local communities participate in planning and decision-making processes. This could assist in ensuring that stakeholders collectively set goals and objectives and take full responsibility for ensuring that they are timeously achievable [24]. This may in turn, strengthens local people's support and responsibility for sustaining ecotourism projects. Garrod [44] concurs that empowering local people could be instrumental in ensuring genuine and long-term support necessary for sustaining ecotourism projects. There are four types of community empowerment [48], and they are: economic empowerment, social empowerment, psychological empowerment and political empowerment. According to Scheyvens, economic empowerment is concerned with ensuring that local people are provided with an opportunity to fully engage in decision-making processes regarding non-ecological benefits of ecotourism. In essence, economic empowerment provides local people with an opportunity to access financial resources involved in ecotourism development activities. Social empowerment enables locals to determine the social impacts resulting from
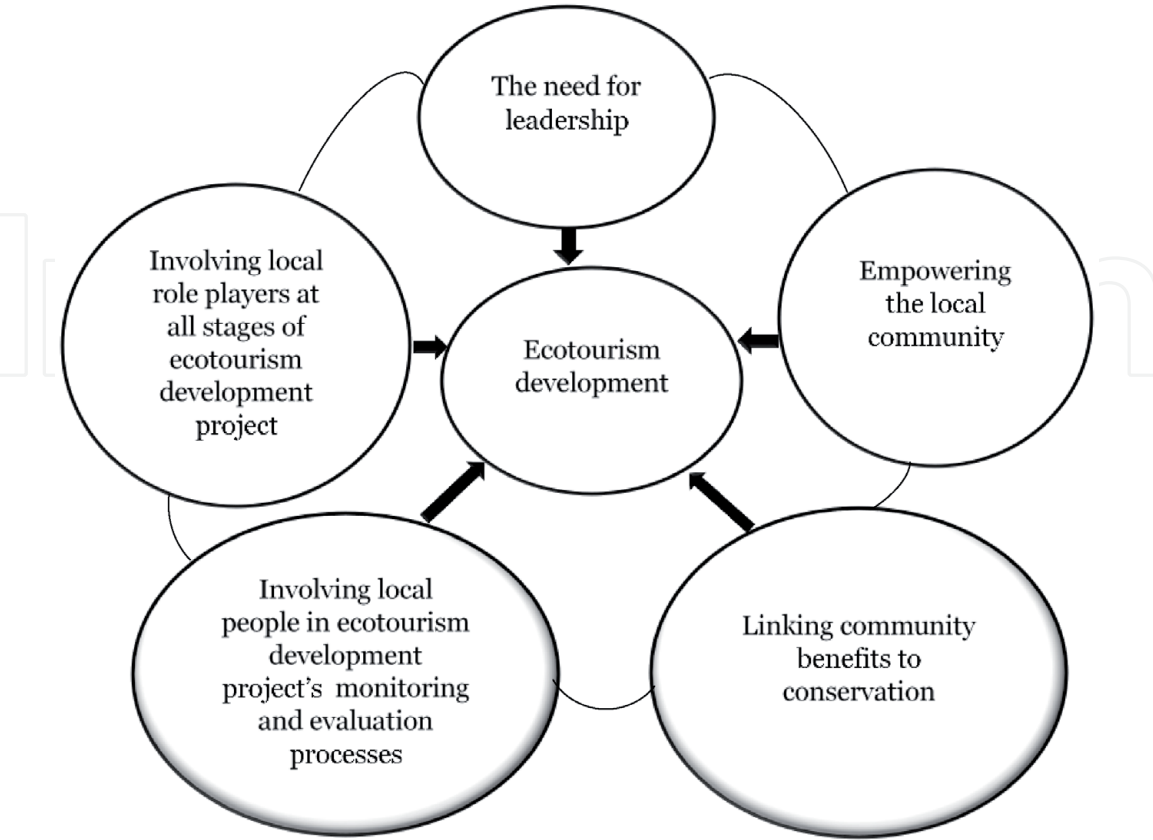

Figure 1.
Indicators for successful community participation in ecotourism. Source: Adapted from Garrod [44].

ecotourism activities. Thus, social cohesion and integrity of the locals form part of social empowerment. Psychological empowerment is concerned with shaping the attitudes that locals may develop over time toward ecotourism development activities. Whereas, political empowerment deals with the ability of the locals to express their concerns toward directing, formatting and accelerating ecotourism development activities.

There is general perception that ecotourism destinations' managers and state agencies responsible for ecotourism development pay minimal attention and allocate limited resources toward monitoring and evaluation of ecotourism development projects [44]. Involving local communities in monitoring and evaluation processes could therefore, increase efficiency while contributing positively toward sustainable ecotourism development. This could assist in enhancing the capacity of local stakeholders and other intended beneficiaries of ecotourism development projects [44]. For the fact that ecotourism development approaches adopted by many tourism destinations prioritize nature conservation over socio-economic and socio-cultural well-being of local communities [18, 21], revenues generated from ecotourism had been solely spent on protection and maintenance of natural resources. This has been done mainly to attract potential tourists and satisfy administrators' ulterior motives [44]. To the contrary, if the local communities are considered for beneficiation, they are more likely to bear a responsibility for custodianship and commit to sustain ecotourism development activity [41]. Butcher [49] echoes that participation of local communities and being considered as beneficiaries foster a sense of pride and ownership amongst them and create opportunities for establishing locally-based small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs) to benefit local entrepreneurs, residents and tourists. However, Stronza [28] argues that the relationship between economic incentives and community participation cannot be easily determined.

Despite being considered as a cardinal tenet of ecotourism development, there is paucity of literature focusing on the nexus between ecotourism and local community well-being [32, 46]. As the preceding writing alludes, despite the fact that most ecotourism activities take place within marginalized, distressed and impoverished communities [12], ecotourism sites managers are more concern with conservation and commodification of natural resources for monetary gains than well-being or welfare of local communities [18, 21]. As a consequence, numerous developing countries in most parts of the world have been declared as non-compliant to ensuring local community participation in ecotourism development processes [46]. Local communities' exclusion, apathy and lack of commitment to participate in ecotourism could result in numerous threats that may be detrimental to ecotourism development, and these include: vandalism, marauding and hostility of locals toward ecotourism sites' authorities and tourists [17]. Nevertheless, local communities in many parts of the world are still excluded from participating in decision-making processes concerning ecotourism development [17]. Linked to local communities' socio-cultural well-being, is the aspect of cultural sensitivity (CS). CS can be understood as the extent to which the adverse impacts related to natural and cultural environments are alleviated by the key stakeholders [50]. Donohoe suggests four ways by which CS can be observed:

- Ensuring that intercultural awareness and respect amongst stakeholders are encouraged;

- Adequate effort is made to sustain the existing heritage;

- Encouraging voluntary participation and ensuring empowerment of local communities; and

- Respecting socio-cultural values of the local communities.

In line with the above, West and Carrier [51] uphold that ecotourism incorporates socio-cultural element which can be manifested through aspirations to interact with local communities and commitment to observe their diverse customs, values and appearance in a respectful manner. Understanding, respecting and considering socio-cultural features of the local communities can play a crucial role in sustaining both ecotourism development endeavors and rapport amongst stakeholders. Ironically, there has been a paucity of empirical evidence on active participation of local communities in ecotourism activities [17]. Against this backdrop, some authors [17, 24] caution that prevalent exclusion of local communities from participating in ecotourism activities may jeopardize its development and sustainability, and result into considerable threats such as criminal offenses against tourists and fractured state between ecotourism sites' personnel and local communities. Tosun [14]; Nyaupane, Morais and Dowler [52]; Swemmer et al. [1] identify numerous factors that may limit participation of local communities in ecotourism, and these are discussed in the subsequent section.

3.2 Limitations to community participation in ecotourism

Participation of local communities in ecotourism may be hindered by numerous limitations, and these are: limitations at the operational level, structural limitations, cultural limitations and fortress conservation.

3.2.1 Limitations at the operational level

The likelihood of implementing a participatory development approach (PDA) has been hindered by factors that are related to operational procedures of the task. These hindrances include: centralization of public administration of ecotourism development, lack of co-ordination between involved parties, and poor dissemination of information to communities residing adjacent to ecotourism sites [14, 52]. Centralization of power to government agencies and privately-owned PAs' authorities restricts the influence of community-level groups during planning and implementation processes. It stifles local community participation thereby adopting a 'top-down-oriented' planning and implementation system. Lacking both co-ordination and co-operation between stakeholders may impact negatively on the quality of ecotourism product and impede effective implementation of participatory ecotourism development approach. It may also hinder potential opportunities for locals to participate in development processes affecting ecotourism sites adjacent to their communities. Inadequate ecotourism data resulting from inequitable dissemination of the available information could result into naivety amongst local communities regarding their role and responsibility in ecotourism development processes. It is therefore, important that all stakeholders including local communities are well informed about resources necessitating sustainable ecotourism development.

3.2.2 Structural limitations

Structural limitations are believed to have been stifling the emergence and implementation of participatory approach to ecotourism development. These

limitations include: attitudes of professionals toward local communities, lack of expertise from politically deployed officials, elite dominance, lacking appropriate legal system, lacking trained human resources, relatively high costs of community participation, and lacking financial resources. Despite playing an important role in formulation of ecotourism policies especially in developing countries, it is apparent that negative attitude displayed by technocrats toward local communities may hinder the emergence and implementation of participatory approach to ecotourism development. Prioritization of local communities' involvement during policy-making processes remains essential for development and sustainability of ecotourism activities. In circumstances whereby responsible bodies lack expertise necessitating sustainable ecotourism development, it is fundamental that all stakeholders are guaranteed an opportunity to be trained on necessary skills and expertise. Tosun [14]; Nyaupane et al. [52] argue cogently that ecotourism development has been merely interpreted as ecotourism growth characterized by improved infrastructure. In essence, these elements do not suffice appropriate ecotourism development, and can therefore, be referred to as myopic ecotourism development approach. The authors suggest that these limitations can be addressed by considering a holistic approach rather than arriving at particular conclusions based on partial considerations which may disregard local community participation as an important contributor toward sustainable ecotourism development. In many parts of world, democratic benefits had been solely enjoyed by certain entrepreneurs and state elites. Equally, ecotourism development processes have been spearheaded by particular local elites in collaboration with international tourism operators. As a consequence, participatory ecotourism development approach has not been adhered to as numerous local communities had been deprived an opportunity to participate in local and national affairs [14, 52].

Local people, especially youths and entrepreneurs should benefit from ecotourism activities through capacity building and multiplier effect. Legal systems adopted by many developing countries do not allow local people a free role to take control of their own affairs. Instead, they exacerbate a participatory gap existing between the masses and authorities. A typical example is India, where community participatory attempts by the state agencies had become futile resulting from a legal system that has been bias toward authorities and against ordinary citizens [14, 52]. Lacking necessary qualifications by most human resources within the tourism sector had prompted importation of skills from foreign countries. This meant that the majority of local people had to occupy low status positions associated with hard labour and meager remunerations. As a result, local people are deprived of participating in planning and decision-making processes regarding ecotourism development as this prerogative has been enjoyed exclusively by foreign employees who occupy top positions. As highlighted in the preceding text, the sector should invest in local people by equipping them with skills necessary for ecotourism development through establishment of capacity building initiatives. In general, local community participation requires sufficient time and financial resources, and necessary skills to sustain. However, in most instances public sector bodies tend to be reluctant to spend colossal amounts of money on facilitating community participation initiatives whose benefits seem to take forever to be realized. Tosun [14]; Nyaupane et al. [52] maintain that high financial costs involved in participatory ecotourism development process had been a main impediment to launching participatory ecotourism development programmes in many parts of the world. Launching ecotourism activities within local communities may require colossal financial resources to be allocated to tourist infrastructural facilities. These facilities need to bear a resemblance to Western standards irrespective of a tourist destination's financial landscape. Financial resources required for ecotourism development are generally scarce, especially in developing

countries. The scarcity of financial resources may hinder execution of participatory ecotourism development both in developing countries and relatively underdeveloped regions of developed countries [14, 52].

3.2.3 Cultural limitations

Culturally predisposed factors such as incapacity, apathy as well as limited awareness of local communities had been considered as limitations to the emergence and implementation of participatory ecotourism development processes [14, 52]. A vast majority of the inhabitants of developing countries encounter challenges with meeting their basic or felt needs as they perceive meeting these as a sole responsibility of the state. Apparently, meeting the needs of tourists take precedence over community development-related issues in many ecotourism destinations. Thus, for the fact that basic survival remains a challenge, participation in ecotourism development processes (as it may consume lots of time and energy) becomes a luxury that vast majority of local communities cannot afford. As a result of socio-cultural, economic as well as political constraints, the majority of the inhabitants of the communities adjacent to ecotourism sites had demonstrated apathy about participating in ecotourism development activities. Another issue of great concern is the fact that vast majority of local communities lack knowledge of ecotourism both as a concept and practical phenomenon. This suggests a great need for enhancing public dialogs and awareness about ecotourism as lack of awareness has been considered as a main barrier to effective local community participation in ecotourism development activities in many parts of the world. Fortress approach to conservation has also prompted numerous socio-economic challenges to local communities [24]. By definition, fortress conservation can be understood as creation and intensive management of protected areas (PAs) characterized by the exclusion of local residents from nature-based areas ([1], p. 5). The phenomenon agitates for eradication of human impact on natural environments as it lends itself well to the notion that nature-based areas should be protected against local communities either by force, coercion or any means necessary [1, 53].

The challenges engendered by fortress conservation include, but not confined to: land dispossession; extensive restrictions; barrier between humans and nature; increased poaching, vandalism and marauding incidents within PAs. Subsequently, there had been ongoing acrimonious relationship and extensive tension between conservation officials and local residents [24]. Historically, many PAs located in developing countries had been built on land from which local residents were forcefully and unlawfully removed. In this sense, fortress conservation denies local residents access to a land that had been expropriated from them through unlawful methods. It is for this reason that Hutton et al. [53] content cogently that local people should benefit from PAs by, amongst other things, participating in nature conservation activities and operating local enterprises that can either directly or indirectly benefit from ecotourism activities. This could strengthen relationships between locals and PAs' personnel, which may subsequently promote conservation of natural resources while sustaining livelihoods of the local residents. As Thondhlana and Cundill [24] echoed "promotion of local communities' inclination and participation in nature conservation activities could impact on transforming the manner in which local communities perceive nature-based areas". However, there are particular instances whereby fortress conservation had been perceived as an expedient intervention to overcome certain challenges that posed serious threat to conservation of particular prestigious animal species. For example, some prominent PAs such as Kruger National Park (KNP) in South Africa and Weza National Park (WNP) in Cameroon in collaboration with local communities had to reinstate

and reinforce fortress conservation that had been dismissed resulting from rampant rhino poaching and frequent marauding incidents occurred in these nature-based areas [54].

Linked to the preceding background, Masberg and Morales [55] suggested five factors that need to be taken into consideration during ecotourism development endeavor, and these are: integrated approach to ecotourism development, proper planning and slow start, enforcing education and training, maximizing local benefits, as well as evaluation and feedback. First, the authors argue that all role players in ecotourism development including local communities should work collaboratively toward achieving a common goal. Second, the development of a business plan for the management of natural resources should be informed by the availability of adequate capacity for achieving anticipated outcomes. Third, all stakeholders including local communities should be trained on ecotourism-related skills. As in Garrod [44], facilitating capacity building amongst target groups serves as one of the advantages of participatory approach to ensure that ecotourism contributes to sustainable development of local communities. Fourth, economic gains from ecotourism activities should be equitably shared amongst all stakeholders including local communities. Finally, comparison between actual and anticipated results from ecotourism activities should be done in order to address and manage identified backlogs, issues and concerns. This could be achieved by ensuring that both formative and summative evaluations are undertaken timeously.

3.3 Approaches for enhancing community participation in ecotourism

In the context of ecotourism, there are various types of participatory approaches, some are internally initiated and driven, while others are driven externally [56]. These include: expert-assisted and expert-initiated approaches to ecotourism development. The former involves the participants that are most likely to reap the benefits derived from ecotourism activities that take place within their communities. The approach enables participants to make decisions and take actions that may influence or determine the sustainability of ecotourism activity. During this process, the participants play an essential role as they define problems, identify sustainability indicators, provide necessary information and generate final set of indicators. In effect, the participants collectively provide necessary information by which inadequate awareness regarding certain issues could be addressed and make appropriate judgments upon which the sustainability indicators are entirely dependent [57]. There are two types of stakeholder groups that are involved in the approach, and these are: [58] community-based stakeholders, and [15] system-based stakeholders. The former consists of local community members also referred to as end-beneficiaries alongside academic researchers who often provide assistance with facilitating discussions and allowing participants to define problems and suggest possible solutions [56]. Whereas, the latter comprises a variety of representatives from the governing, private and public sectors that are capable of influencing the operationalization of ecotourism activities. This stakeholder group engages in a joint information-sharing-system-dynamics modeling often characterized by collective undertakings and intensive level of commitment to time and resources. The participants take full responsibility for identifying indicators on the basis of established and modeled utility for monitoring ecotourism activity so as to fast-track the criteria as well as indicators analysis and consensus-building process [59]. The expert-initiated approach allows participants including external actors and non-local specialists to contribute toward developing conceptual framework, identifying a cluster of indicators that can be instrumental

during execution of the ecotourism project and collectively participate in a risk assessment process [56].

The approach makes provision for both local-based and system-based participants as their role(s) in the ecotourism activity is determined mainly by an initially set list of objectives and goals, as well as the available resources. Local-based participants include members of the local communities and community representatives, whereas system-based participants involve external experts (i.e. tourism specialists, agents and academic researchers). External experts are responsible for defining problems and studying the activities to be undertaken as stipulated in the work-breakdown-structure (WBS) of the ecotourism development project. More so, they ensure that a mutual decision is made regarding indicators and management strategies that are adopted to sustain ecotourism development project [56]. It is therefore, important that external experts develop indicators that are informed by rigorous assessment of basic characteristics of ecotourism development project. Otherwise, the participants would not succeed in addressing the identified unique key issues and often fail to incorporate concerns and recommendations raised or made during participatory sessions or workshops [60]. Nonetheless, expert-initiated approach has been considered in many parts of the world as a vehicle through which sustainable, efficient and resource conservation-oriented ecotourism development could be achieved [56].

3.4 The need for the local community participation improvement model

Review of literature [14, 32, 39, 44, 45] reveals that local communities in collaboration with other stakeholders could play a significant role in ensuring development and sustainability of ecotourism development process. However, in many parts of world especially in developing countries, local communities have not been considered as important stakeholders who can make a significant contribution toward the development and sustainability of ecotourism endeavors. Consequently, they have not been considered for playing a role in planning and decision-making processes regarding ecotourism development [14, 39, 44, 46]. Moreover, local communities' socio-economic and socio-cultural well-being have not been considered as an important elements of ecotourism development by numerous state agencies and conservation authorities in many ecotourism destinations [12, 18, 21]. Although some authors [56, 57, 59] presented participatory approaches (i.e. expert-assisted and expert-initiated approaches) that may have been used in ecotourism development projects, there have been quite a number of limitations that are considered to have been impeding local community participation in such projects [1, 14, 52]. These impediments are: limitations at the operational level, structural limitations, cultural limitations and fortress conservation. In addition, Botes and van Rensburg [61] argue cogently that Western-centric oriented participation frameworks adopted by the vast majority of state administrators in many parts of the world neither suit the context within which they are implemented nor serve the intended purpose (i.e. enhancing local community participation in ecotourism development process). Against this backdrop, Gumede and Nzama [62] developed a model that sought to form conceptual basis for planning, formulation, implementation and management of policies related to participation of local communities in ecotourism-related initiatives. The model takes into account the main challenges that are reported to have been inhibiting a vast majority of local communities, especially in developing countries to actively participate in development initiatives undertaken within the boundaries of their residential setting. The model entitled: "Local community participation improvement model (LCPIM)" is presented (see **Figure 2**) and unpacked below.
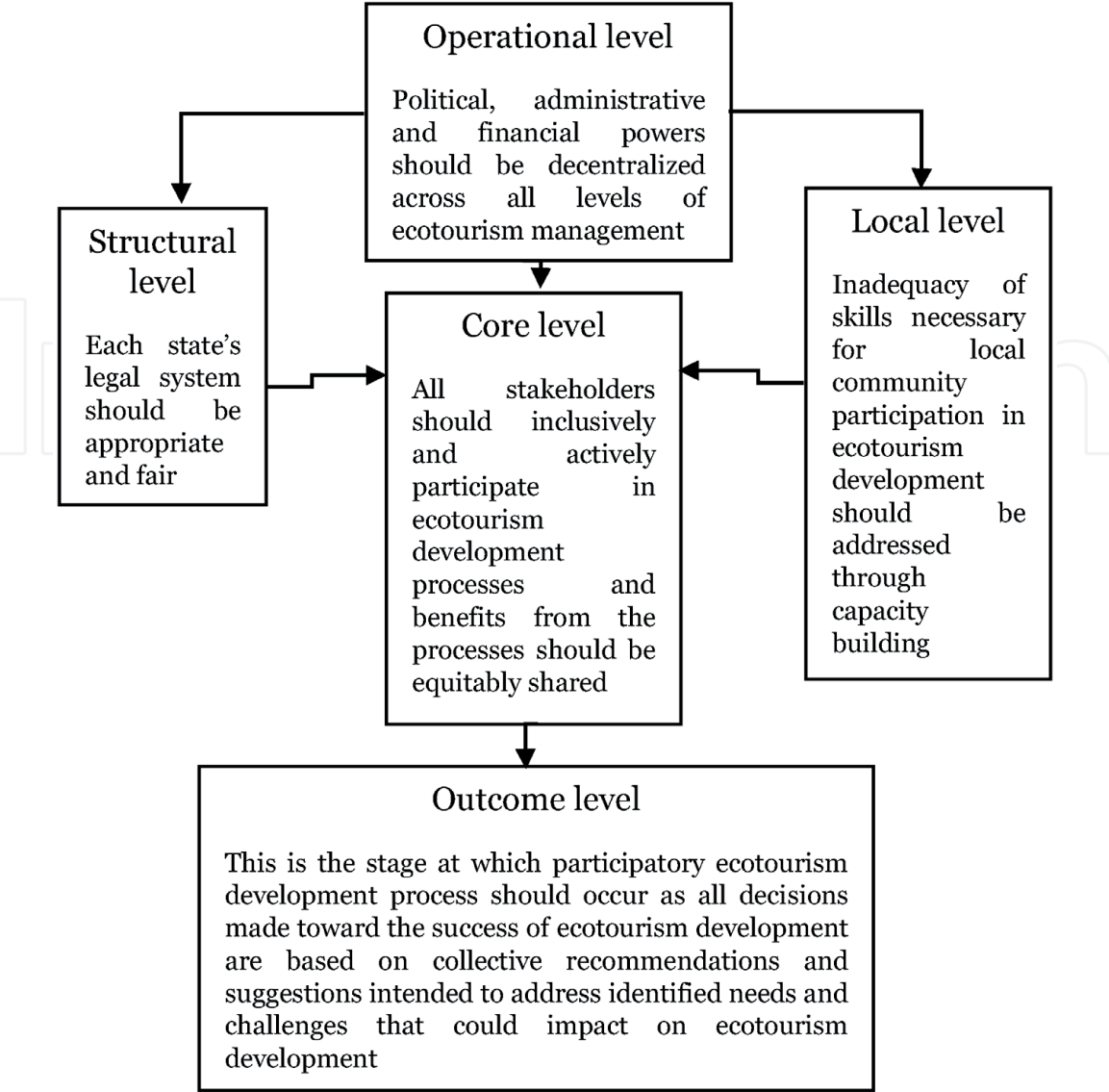
Figure 2.
A model for enhancing community participation in ecotourism activities. Source: Authors.

3.4.1 Components of the model

The model is comprised of five interconnected elements that are demarcated into different levels that have been considered as critical in enhancing participation of local communities in ecotourism development process. The levels (operational, structural, local, core and outcome levels) have been considered as fundamental for facilitating community participation in ecotourism activities based on two reasons: [58] flexibility to fit in a variety of contexts, and [15] capability for enhancing local community participation in ecotourism development processes resulting from their interconnectedness. The first three levels (i.e. operational, structural and local levels) relate to different institutional levels and their roles in ecotourism development process. Whereas, the other two levels (i.e. core and outcome levels) relate to the expected outcome resulting from the interconnectedness of the preceding levels.

3.4.1.1 The first level (operational level)

There are three elements that constitute the operational level. The first element focuses on the importance of decentralizing authority to administer ecotourism development process. The second element focuses on the importance of appropriate

co-ordination of ecotourism resources, and the third element focuses on the importance of disseminating information across all governance spectrum.

3.4.1.1.1 Decentralizing authority to administer ecotourism development process

Decentralizing authority to administer ecotourism development process across all governance continuum remains a giant step toward facilitating community participation in development initiatives [14, 63, 64]. According to Ribot [65], decentralization of administrative authority could facilitate inclusive participation while promoting equitable and efficient management of development initiatives. In ecotourism perspective, decentralization of administrative authority could assist in reshaping the manner in which natural resources are managed by local institutions such that community participation is intensified to equitably benefit the authorities, tourists and all those who may affect or be affected by the usage of natural resources [65]. However, in most parts of the world, the overall authority for public administration has been vested in the central government under a direct management of political executives. Consequently, decentralization of power to manage natural resources has often been lacking local representation and downward accountability [14, 65]. It was for this reason that the World Bank [64] made a claim that 'decentralization has been haphazardly implemented'. As such, the influence of community-based groups regarding management of natural resources has been extensively restricted and widely characterized by vertical distance between those who are responsible for planning and a broad spectrum of masses [14].

In numerous developing countries; development, monitoring and administration of tourism policies have been solely undertaken by the central government agencies. As such, ecotourism- related policies have been used as a vehicle to fulfill predetermined national administrators' political and economic agendas [14]. Thus, the LCPIM advocates decentralization of administrative powers from national to provincial and local spheres of ecotourism governance. Although some government agencies such as the Ezemvelo KwaZulu-Natal Wildlife (EKZNW) based in KwaZulu-Natal province, South Africa, have been mandated by the country's laws and regulations such as the KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Management Act, Act No. 9 of 1997, to administer conservation of natural resources while ensuring ecotourism development and promotion at provincial level, local authorities and communities barely participate in decision-making processes regarding ecotourism development. Against this backdrop, LCPIM seeks to assist in addressing 'top-down' geared public administration and serve as a linkage between different spheres of governance to create an enabling environment for local community participation in administration of their own affairs.

3.4.1.1.2 Appropriate co-ordination of ecotourism resources

Prevalent fragmentation and conflicts amongst state agencies, conservation authorities and local communities may engender poor co-ordination of ecotourism resources. Adversely, resentment and conflict amongst stakeholders could nullify proper implementation of participatory ecotourism development activities [66]. Generally, stakeholders hold diverse views and expectations which may result in poor planning and decision-making regarding ecotourism development process [44, 67]. A systematic approach is therefore, required to strengthen rapport and facilitate consensus amongst stakeholders. The LCPIM could be resourceful in addressing fragmentation and conflicts amongst different stakeholders involved in ecotourism development process as it advocates for collective problem-solving and decision-making initiatives. It seeks to provide a conducive platform for

stakeholders, based on their capacity, to make optimum contribution necessary for facilitating participatory ecotourism development process.

3.4.1.1.3 Dissemination of information

Local communities in many parts of the world lack information on ecotourism resulting from insufficient availability of ecotourism-related data. The only available information has been disseminated to the public through incomprehensive means [68]. A study conducted by Bello et al. [66] indicates that local communities lack understanding of ecotourism resulting from concentration of tourism information within management agencies, government and NGOs. Consequently, most inhabitants of local communities do not understand their main role in ecotourism development process. In response, the LCPIM can be used to address poor dissemination of information as it advocates for equitable share of information amongst all stakeholders through comprehensive, efficient and effective means.

3.4.1.2 The second level (structural level)

At this level, the LCPIM makes suggestions on how legal systems can contribute toward facilitating participatory ecotourism development process.

3.4.1.2.1 Suitable legal system at all spheres of governance

Tosun [14] argues cogently that participatory ecotourism could contribute significantly toward creating platforms for legal structures to implement effective tourism-related legislation. Although existing legal frameworks (mostly adopted from the West as [61] upheld) may have not been impacting adversely on the aspirations of those who are actively participating in ecotourism development process, it may on the vast majority of defenseless local communities. Legal frameworks that are adopted in many parts of world, especially in developing countries do not make provisions for locals to influence decisions affecting their concerns [14]. Thus, a customized legal system that is aimed at protecting local communities' constitutional rights and promoting participatory development initiatives is necessary. The LCPIM can be used to sensitize policy-makers and legal specialist to disadvantages of foreign-centric legislation and acknowledging tailor-made and inclusive policy-making process.

3.4.1.3 The third level (local level)

This level of LCPIM focuses on how community development-oriented initiatives can facilitate impartial distribution of resources and benefits derived from ecotourism development activities.

3.4.1.3.1 Impartial distribution of ecotourism benefits

Impartial share of ecological and non-ecological benefits generated from ecotourism activities has remained amongst popular scholarly arguments for quite some time [69]. Numerous theories (i.e. stakeholder theory, social exchange theory and participatory theory) share a common view that human behavior including both inclination and apathy is determined by cost–benefit analysis. In a nutshell, people become inclined to participate in endeavors from which they reap benefits and vice versa [40, 66, 70, 71]. The main principles of ecotourism encompass enhancing socio-economic well-being of the local communities and facilitating

inclusive ecotourism development participatory approach [6]. Accordingly, equitable distribution of benefits derived from ecotourism has been advocated by numerous agencies involved in ecotourism development [66]. Natural resources form part of ecological benefits derived from ecotourism and have been used by local communities as a source of life, food, shelter and clothing. Local people obtain medicinal herbs, firewood, fruits and vegetables as well as timber and grass for building purposes from animal and plant species found within nature-based areas. However, in many parts of the world local people have been either deprived of or under strict surveillance permitted by conservation sites' authorities to harvest as limited resources as possible [66]. In addition, some cultural beliefs prohibit local people to have direct contact with certain animal and plant species while others prohibit women from working in the same environment with male counterparts [72]. Against this background, the LCPIM seeks to facilitate consideration of local community well-being such that local people reap equitable share of ecological and non-ecological ecotourism benefits. Furthermore, it agitates for inclusive participation in ecotourism activities by all stakeholders irrespective of their race, gender and cultural beliefs.

3.4.1.3.2 Equitable distribution of resources

There has been a growing interest in local community development initiatives resulting from their capability for addressing socio-economic challenges [73]. Review of literature [74, 75] reveals that local community development initiatives differ in nature in terms size, uniqueness and complexity. Accordingly, resources that are necessary for achieving aims and objectives set for each development initiative are completely unique in nature. Westerveld [75] maintains that a specific set of resources that align with unique requirements, aims and objectives is required for ensuring sustainability of any local community development initiative. Equally, the model upholds distribution of resources in accordance with identified needs, aims and objectives as well as desired outcome of ecotourism development initiative. This can be achieved by ensuring collective engagements amongst stakeholders who work as a consortium in identifying and addressing challenges that may inhibit achievement of aims and objectives set for ecotourism development initiative. Expertise is one of the most essential resource toward successful ecotourism development. Ironically, expertise has been identified as a most sought-after resource in ecotourism development initiatives worldwide [14, 66]. According to the authors, there are two prevalent factors that contribute to lack of expertise necessary for ecotourism development amongst local communities, and these are: [58] the fact that the majority of local people is constituted by adults and youths who have not been trained on tourism-related skills, and [15] that governments in many developing countries have been reluctant to inject financial resources by which capacity development programmes could be initiated. In view of the above, the LCPIM suggests that governments and funding institutions should redirect their focus toward local communities as target beneficiaries for tourism-related capacity building programmes. This could assist in increasing a number of people who are capable of effecting positive change in ecotourism activities such that the activities are perceived as community treasure rather than a source of resentment and tension between stakeholders.

3.4.1.4 The fourth level (core level)

This level serves as the heart of the LCPIM upon which the existence and implementation of other components extensively depend. This is the level that

places more emphasis on facilitation of inclusive participation and equal share of important status by all stakeholders.

3.4.1.4.1 Inclusive participation and equal share of important status by all stakeholders

While there are numerous ecological and non-ecological attributes of ecotourism, one can not dispute the fact that its success hinges extensively upon collective participation of different stakeholders [18, 26, 27]. Collective partnerships amongst stakeholders had been promulgated as an essential vehicle through which beneficial and sustainable ecotourism development can be attained [58, 76]. In her reiteration, the then Executive Director of the International Ecotourism Society (TIES), Martha Honey, had to emphasize:

> *Considering the importance of collective participation of all stakeholders in community-based initiatives is crucial for ecotourism development ([21], p. 269).*

Drawing from the above literary background, the LCPIM intends to ensure that inclusive participation and equal share of important status by all stakeholders is not only theoretically but also facilitated in a concrete manner.

3.4.1.5 The fifth level (outcome level)

This level serves to ensure that the ultimate goal (i.e. enhancing local community participation in ecotourism development process) for developing the LCPIM is achieved.

3.4.1.5.1 Participatory ecotourism development process

Participatory ecotourism development process is the expected outcome or an ultimate goal resulting from adoption and proper implementation of the LCPIM's interconnected components. Once the limitations to local community participation in ecotourism development process have been identified and addressed by applying LCPIM, it is anticipated that there could be a significant improvement in terms of local community participation in ecotourism activities worldwide.

4. Conclusion

The concept of community participation is regarded as an important tool to assist in ecotourism sustainable development and enhancing local socio-economies of numerous rural communities. While this initiative may be argued as an ideal toward achieving successful development objectives, there is always missing link in its implementation which results in a failure to achieve the expected ecotourism development overall objectives. Many literatures have reported that local communities have not been actively participating in ecotourism development process due to various factors such as socio-economic, lacking of skills, rural setting, misunderstanding of roles, etc. In response, a model that sought to facilitate active participation of local communities in ecotourism development initiatives had been developed. Although it may not be a panacea to all challenges faced by those involved and those who should be involved in ecotourism development initiatives, the model is aimed at ensuring that all stakeholders, based on their unique capacity, actively participate at all levels of ecotourism development project.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Declaration

The authors would like to declare that this chapter entitled: "Approaches toward local community participation enhancement in ecotourism" is their own work and has not been submitted elsewhere for publication purposes. All sources that are cited or quoted in the text had been duly acknowledged and included in the list of references.

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