

Opportunities and Challenges of Community Participation in Community-Based Ecotourism Development: A case of Wof-Washa Forest Area

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Abstract

The involvement of the community is the lifeblood to Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) development in the destination. The study focused on investigate opportunities and challenges to community participation in the development of the Ecotourism. The study employed descriptive design with mixed approach via cross-sectional survey. The target population were community members and tourism experts. It used systematic, stratified, and purposeful sampling methods. Primary data collected via questionnaires, interview, structured observation, and secondary data by document review. The analysis method was thematic for qualitative, and descriptive statistics for quantitative data. The study indicated communities are motivated to participate in ecotourism development due to income, employment, infrastructure, and cultural revitalization benefits. However, unfair distribution of benefits, HWC (Human-wildlife conflicts), shortage of skilled manpower, and absence of coordination among stakeholders are hampered their involvement. Generally, the participation of community stimulated by opportunities, but limited by bottleneck factors. The author recommend that all stakeholders should be working in collaborative way to reduced obstacles by improving motivator elements of community participation for develop an impactful community-based ecotourism project in Wof-Washa National Priority Forest Area.

Keywords: Ecotourism, Community Participation, Wof-Washa Forest, Opportunity, Challenge.

A. INTRODUCTION

Tourism has become a global powerhouse for driving economic expansion, environmental concerns, and socio-cultural aspects in worldwide (Kalinichenko & Novikova, 2019; Tahiri et al., 2021; Sofronov, 2018). It contributes 6% of global GDP and 1 in 11 jobs (WTTC, 2022). Despite the global slowdown, Africa's tourism industry has staged a remarkable comeback. It injected USD 119 billion into GDP and created 21.3 million jobs. This rapid resurgence underscores the immense potential of tourism as a driver of development across the continent (WTTC, 2022). Ethiopia's rich tapestry of natural wonders, historical sites, and cultural gems has solidified its position as a major tourist draw. It contributed a hefty 5.6% to GDP and 3.2% of total employment. This booming sector is crucial for both economic growth (Zegeye, 2016; AEO, 2024).

In the 1980s, ecotourism emerged as a solution to the negative impacts of traditional mass tourism (Arifianto et al., 2023). Ecotourism is defined as ethical travel to pristine locations that prioritize environment and resident welfare (Tsfaye, 2017). Ecotourism has been recognized at the local and national level as a strategy with the potential to yield social, economic, and ecological advantages (Das & Chatterjee, 2015), it integrates community development and welfare and gaining popularity as a means of conserving biodiversity (Mohd Noh, 2020). Both service providers and tourists share the responsibility of promoting the true essence of ecotourism (Das & Chatterjee, 2015).

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One of the most common forms of ecotourism is community-based ecotourism. It prioritizes environmental protection with greater empowerment of communities near natural attractions. It also ensured benefits directly flow to their communities, improving livelihoods and promoting conservation goals. This sustainable approach involves diverse stakeholders and fosters responsible tourism practices (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Tesfaye, 2017; Mensah, 2017; Arifianto et al., 2023). In the CBET context, community is defined as a collective of individuals with shared values who inhabit a specified area and work together to common goals (Afenyo-Agbe and Mensah, 2021).

Generally, sustainable CBET flourishing hinges on active community participation (Wei et al., 2020; Kaur et al., 2016). Nevertheless, their involvement affected positively and negatively by opportunity and challenges respectively. Communities are involved in the decision-making processes of ecotourism project development (Wei et al., 2020). Their involvement is motivated by opportunities such as cultural preservation, livelihood, advancement, and environmental conservation, respects indigenous rights and customs, fostering mutually beneficial relationships (Das & Chatterjee, 2015; Kumi et al., 2018; Teshome et al., 2021; Rogos et al., 2021). However, it challenged by unequal sharing of benefits, a centralized tourism administration, lack of coordination among stakeholder, low financial resources, inadequate information (Kumi et al., 2018; Bello et al., 2017). This study aimed to investigate the opportunities and challenges of community involvement in ecotourism project development.

Sustainable Natural Resources Management Association (SUNARMA) developed ecotourism project in Wof-Washa Natural Forest in collaborate with residents and other responsible bodies in 2006. The fund obtained from the Critical Ecosystems Partnership Fund. This project developed for the purpose of reduce the illegal overexploitation of forest resources by provide alternative income generating chances. It builds various tourism amenities such as campsites, trekking routes, as well as day visitor facilities. This is creating new economic opportunities for communities and also raising awareness of the importance of forest conservation (Spooner, 2022).

Studies on Wof-Washa Natural Forest have been done by a variety of academicians in regarding to the following topics: the community's knowledge and attitudes toward HWC and problematic wildlife (Tadesse & Zewde, 2019), the threat of illegal overexploitation activities by the community (Woldie & Tadesse, 2018; Anrsefpa, 2021), and the potential, opportunities, and suitability of the forest for the CBET project (Teshome 2018; Woldie & Tadesse, 2018). However, opportunities and challenges of community participation in ecotourism development was not explored. Furthermore, scholars stated that community members are motivated to participate in CBET development for economic, socio-cultural, environmental, improved destinations, sustainable development, and community empowerment benefits (Afenyo & Amuquandoh, 2014; Indiarti & Munir, 2016; Jaafar et al., 2020; Wei et al., 2020; Kummitha & Osiako, 2020; Rogos et al., 2021; Bhatta, 2023; Ibol & Amina, 2024).

However, income generation, employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and cultural revitalization issues are often overlooked. Additionally, researchers inferred that community participation in ecotourism development limited by lack of interest, marketing and promotional problems, competition from foreign investors, safety and security issues, lack of capital, conflict on ownership, and mismanagement, and operational, structural, and cultural limitations (Tosun, 2000; Kumi et al., 2018; Kunjuran, 2022). However, they have not touched factors like unfair benefit distributions, HWC, shortage of trained human resources, and lack of coordination among stakeholders' issues. Therefore, the researcher was motivated to tackle these gaps in order to provide suggestions that would aid to establish a well-organized CBET project at Wof-Washa Forest.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

Study Design and Approach

Wof-Washa Priority National Forest is a state forest, which is located in central highlands of Ethiopia, and containing unique plant and animal species. Covering 3197 hectares, it ranges in altitude from 1900 to 3700 meters. Located in Tarmaber, Ankober, and Bassonawerena districts, and it is distributed across 14 subdistricts. To address the issues in this study, entitled opportunities and challenges of community participation in CBET development in Wof-Washa Forest, the researcher employed descriptive design, because it used to identify and describe the significant existing conditions and variable relationships. With regard to the approach taken, mixed approaches were used to gather information through different data gathering instruments for triangulation purpose.

The study targeted household heads that resided in Goshu-Ager and Keyit from Basonaworena, Mescha from Ankober, and Wof-Washa Genet from Tarmaber Districts. The selected kebeles were chosen based on their benefits from the forest, comfort for tourism development, proximity to the forest, and dependence on household life. It also targeted tourism expert from Basonaworena, Tarmaber, and Ankober woredas' tourism offices. The study utilized stratified sampling to categorize households based on geographic settlement, and systematic sampling to select samples from each kebele, and purposeful methods to select tourism professionals for semi-structured interview, and kebeles. The researcher used the rule of thumb formula to determine the sample size of 2996 household heads in four kebeles. Based on rule of thumb, descriptive studies typically use a sample size of at least 10% of target population (Vanvoorhis & Morgan, 2007). Figure 1 describe sample size formula based on rule of thumb for descriptive studies.

$$\text{Sample size} = 10\%(\text{Population}) = 0.1 \times \text{Number of Population}$$

Figure 1. Sample size formula

Total population of four kebeles is 2996 households, then the sample size = $0.1 \times 2996 = 299.6$. So, the sample size(n) is 300 household heads. The researcher used 300 household heads from selected forest-touched kebeles as representative samples for the study. The study used stratified sampling to divide respondents into homogenous groups based on geographic settlement. These 300 household heads divided by each kebele in proportion to their size using proportional allocation formula.

Table 1. Four selected kebeles population size and their sample

No	Kebeles	Household	Sample	Percentage Selected
1	Mescha	782	78	26%
2	Wof-Washa Genet	552	54	18%
3	Goshager	684	69	23%
4	Keyit	978	99	33%
Total		2996	300	100%

Source: Author survey (2024)

Data Analysis

The study employed descriptive statistics to analyze quantitative data collected through questionnaires by using SPSS version 26. The researcher utilized a Likert scale with five points to measure respondents' opinions or attitudes in surveys, providing a general interpretation of the mean score based on rule of thumb ranges. The numerical values of these options are strongly disagree (1.00-1.80), disagree

(1.81-2.60), moderate (2.61-3.40), agree (3.41-4.20), and strongly agree (4.21-5.0). Thematic analysis was used to interpret qualitative data from semi-structured interviews.

**Table 2. Demographic Profile of Respondents
(n=240)**

Age	Frequency	%
18-25	53	22.1
26-35	103	42.9
36-55	71	29.6
>55	13	5.4
Education		
Illiterate	55	22.9
Adult-education	74	30.8
1-8	72	30.0
9-12	27	11.3
Graduate & above	12	5.0
Livelihood		
Agriculture	161	67.1
Trade	31	12.9
Tourism	22	9.2
Salary	12	5.0
Other	14	5.8

Source: Author survey (2024)

The study reveals that the majority of respondents aged between 26-35 years, so they are experienced and younger, as a result they provide reliable information about the study area. Most household heads are educated from adult education to graduate, making them easily understand ecotourism concepts when explained by experts. Agriculture is a dominant livelihoods activity, but tourism is low makes the development of ecotourism challenging.

C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Employment Opportunities

Table 3 shows that most respondents agreed on the items that described about ecotourism project's generate sustainable income for the community through providing several employment opportunities with diverse skills and interests. This implicated that the community was motivated to participate in ecotourism development because of obtaining income via engaged in various tourism related activities. As observation and interview, community has engaged in different ecotourism projects employments including seed breeding, forest protection, hospitality service (See Figure 2), selling cultural goods, and aiding tourists during trekking and related activities (See Figure 3). Besides, some resident members also collect dry fuel-woods and sell them in Debre Berhan town (Interview, April, 2024). These findings support previous studies conducted by Mensah, (2017), Abukhalifeh & Wondirad, (2019), and Ibol & Amina, 2024. They concluded that ecotourism activities generate income through fees for facility use, service providers, sales, royalties, contributions, and taxes. In underdeveloped nations, it helps eradicate poverty by providing new revenue streams for families. Additionally, tourist has generated income for food vendors, craftspeople, small merchants, and owners of lodging establishments that helps diversify the local economy.

Table 3. Opportunities to Community Participation in Ecotourism Development at Wof-Washa Forest

Attributes	Mean	Std. Deviation
Ecotourism development are created new income for the community.	4.00	.989
Ecotourism project provide sustainable source of income.	3.85	1.012
Ecotourism programs offer new jobs in the community.	3.99	.983
Ecotourism project provide a variety of employment options.	3.83	.943
Improvement of infrastructure within destination.	3.76	1.143
Planned to minimize negative impacts on the environment.	3.80	1.032
preserve and promote the traditional culture.	3.99	.884
Facilitating exchanging culture with visitors.	4.05	.971
Creating a sense of pride in the community to their cultural identity.	4.05	.947
Valid n (listwise)	240	
Average Mean	3.9236	0.7378

Source: Data Processing Result (2024)



Figure 2. Afforestation and Reforestation Project and Hospitality Service

Source: Author own documentations (2024)



Figure 3. Tourism-Related Activities in Wof-Washa Forest

Source: Author own documentations (2024)

Infrastructure Development

Most of respondents agreed with the item's about ecotourism programs are improved infrastructure like trekking route and tourist campsite and also planned various strategies to minimize negative impacts on the environment while improving infrastructure. This implies that, communities are inspired to participate in the Wof-Washa forest ecotourism project due to the improvement of infrastructure which is used by community members both directly and indirectly like trekking routes and lodges, and planning activities to minimize environmental impacts. This result supported by the interviewee and author observation. This finding consistent with Sivannavong & Wibisono, (2022), Mensah, (2017), and Afenyo & Amuquandoh (2014) findings. They found out that CBET initiative contributes to infrastructure development by providing cash for societal use projects like highways, bridges, and other. Ecotourism projects offer education programs about building, maintenance, and hospitality service for equipping communities with necessary skills for infrastructure development and upkeep. Therefore, the tourism sector plays a crucial role in infrastructure and social service advancement (See Figure 4).



Figure 4. Infrastructure and Social Service Provide by CBET Program
Source: Author own documentations (2024)

Cultural Revitalization

Majority of respondents had a positive opinion on the parameter's about ecotourism project helps to community for preserving, promoting, and exchanging of their culture with tourists. In addition, it creates a sense of pride in the community to their unique-cultural identity. This implies that the local residents motivated to participate in ecotourism project due to exchange their unique culture, way of life, experience, and other aspects with tourists in the destination. It also fosters community pride and identity through sharing of their cultural heritage and traditions with visitors. This finding concurs with interviewees, local people offer different traditional handicrafts like hats and Zitet which are made from sheep hair, sculptures, and other cultural goods to tourists, especially a culture of hospitality is attracts tourists. Additionally, some community members invited tourists especially foreign travelers to their homes, even if they trek with them to the forest (Interview, April, 2024). It also supported Abukhalifeh & Wondirad (2019) and Afenyo-Agbe & Mensah (2021) findings. They found that meeting new people from within and outside a community is interesting and beneficial for communities. CBET important to improving quality of life, fostering community pride, ensuring environmental and cultural sustainability (See Figure 5). In addition, it provides fund for seminars and cultural events, this help to preserve traditions for future generations.



Figure 4. Tourists Experience with The Local Communities

Source: Author own documentations (2024)



Figure 5. Human-Wildlife Conflicts and Measure to Preventing

Source: Author own documentations (2024)

Challenge of Community Participation in Ecotourism Project Development

Majority of respondents agreed on, communities around Wof-Washa forest have not gained fair advantages from the ecotourism project, and have no transparent financial records regarding income and expenditures. This implies that the local community's involvement in CBET development is hindered by the uneven distribution of profits from ecotourism activities in the Wof-Washa Forest. This supported by interview, the profit generated from the ecotourism project was distributed to some community members who were a member of the representative committee, but the mass peoples did not benefit from the ecotourism project based on their contributions. Besides, the financial record is not presented to the broader community members (Interview, April, 2024).

It also concurrent with Su & Wall, (2014) and Bello et al., (2017) results, it stated that local communities are motivate to involved in ecotourism project to maximize their benefits. However, communities are often discouraged from participating in ecotourism project due to uneven distribution and lack of access to ecotourism advantages, and they are unable to participate in protected area management and planning activities.

Human-Wildlife Conflict

Table 4 shows that most respondents agreed with the statements: HWC problems are occurred due to encroachment, farmland and settlement expansion, and livestock grazing, and it hinder community involvement in ecotourism development. This implies that community involvement in CBET project

growth is impeded by HWC at Wof-Washa Forest. However, the key informant response opposed this finding, but based on Tadesse & Zewde (2019) findings and author observation there is HWC problem in Wof-Washa Forest that raised from population pressure, timber production, and increased demand for agricultural land (Anrsefpa, 2021). So, in the case area, the community involvement is hindered by HWC problems.

This finding is supported by Bello et al., (2017), Tadesse & Zewde, (2019), Biset et al., (2019), Seoraj-Pillai and Pillay, (2017), and Agyeman and Baidoo, (2019) study's results. They inferred that, HWC is a significant issue in protected areas, and leading to crop raiding, property damage, and attacks on humans. This creates obstacles for community participation and can result in property destruction, deaths, and home demolition. Local populations are often hostile towards park management and government representatives, because there is no legislation or regulatory framework about compensation that related to HWC losses. To address this, the government, organizations, and other stakeholders must work together to reduce conflict and build stronger relationships with local populations.

Lack of Skilled Personnel

Based on table 4, the majority of informants agreed with the item's on insufficient skilled personnel with necessary skills for ecotourism jobs, lacking opportunities for skill development through training programs, and ecotourism projects not prioritizing hiring and training local community members. It implicated the community involvement in ecotourism development limited by lack of skilled personnel in Wof-Washa Forest. According to key informants, most communities were educated from adult education to graduate, nevertheless they haven't knowledge about ecotourism concepts. So, SUNARMA hired employees from Addis Ababa such as tour-guide, and promoters (Interview, April, 2024).

These findings are consistent with studies conducted by Bello et al., (2017), Baum, (2018), and Afenyo-Agbe & Mensah, (2021). It shows that educated people are crucial for ecotourism development. However, protected area management organizations often lack trained personnel in ecotourism planning, this limiting community engagement. Offering jobs in tourism can involve community members, but without necessary training, locals may work in janitor positions and foreigners may be hired in higher positions.

Absence of Coordination Among Stakeholders

As table 4, the majority of respondents agreed with the items the community not conducting discussions about ecotourism development with other stakeholders, and ecotourism program does not facilitate a transparent decision-making process that involves all stakeholders. This implies that a lack of coordination among several responsible bodies was hampered the involvement of local inhabitants in ecotourism development in Wof-Washa Forest. However, as a key informant, there are different discussions made with several responsible bodies, but they were not changing into practice. These discussions were held among community, government officials, and SUNARMA by focused on ecotourism issues like equitable benefits, project status, improvement activities, protected area demarcation, and infrastructure development (Interview, April, 2024).

This finding concurs with the study conducted by Bello et al., (2017) and Afenyo-Agbe & Mensah, (2021) outcomes. They inferred that tourism sector consist various stakeholders, including government agencies, NGOs, landowners, small enterprises, community, organizations, tour operators and others bodies. Ineffective coordination among these stakeholders can lower the efficiency of participatory ecotourism development and endanger the quality of the tourism offering. Communities' participation in ecotourism developments is hampered by lack of coordination among government agencies, NGOs, and

community-based groups. Establishing systems that promote the coordination among stakeholders is crucial for optimizing ecotourism development in the destinations.

D. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate opportunities' and challenges of community participation in ecotourism development. The quantitative and qualitative analysis indicated, the community's participation in ecotourism developments driven by income, employment opportunities, infrastructure development, and cultural revitalization advantages. However, it is limited by obstacles such as unfair-sharing of benefits, HWC, shortage of trained personnel, and lack of coordination among stakeholders. Generally, community has carried-out several activities in the development of the CBET project motivated by stimulants force, i.e., opportunities, but their engagement is impeded by challenging issues. This indicated that the participation of community in CBET development motivated and limited by opportunity and challenge factors respectively.

This study makes the following insightful theoretical contributions. It made a comprehensive review of the existing body of knowledge on opportunities' and challenges of community participation in CBET development at different destinations. This attempt was help to successfully identify research gaps that pave the way for future research. It also highlighted opportunity factors that motivate the communities participation in ecotourism development like income, employment, infrastructure, and cultural revitalization benefits and filled the previous studies gap (Afenyo & Amuquandoh., 2014; Indiarti & Munir, 2016; Jaafar et al., 2020; Kummitha & Osiako, 2020; Wei et al., 2020; Rogos et al., 2021; Bhatta, 2023; Ibol & Amina, 2024;). Furthermore, it emphasized the challenge factors that limit the community participation in ecotourism project development such as unfair benefit distributions, HWC, shortage of trained manpower, and absence of coordination, and bridged the past study gaps (Tosun, 2000; Kumi et al., 2018; Kunjuraman, 2022).

Additionally, it makes some imperative practical contributions. The study provides empirical evidence about opportunities and challenges of community participation in ecotourism project development issues, as well as mitigation strategies for policymakers and industry experts. Policymakers should be working cooperatively with other stakeholders to increase the community influence on ecotourism project by promoting opportunity aspects through reducing challenge factors. It also affords a practical contribution to responsible bodies: the community was ambitious to engage in CBET project development due to income, job, infrastructure, and culture-revitalization advantages, but it was hampered by unfair sharing of benefits, HWC, shortage of trained personnel, and lack of coordination among stakeholder challenges. So, the stakeholders should be working together to improve motivator aspects through reduce the existing bottlenecks.

The study inferred that income generation, job opportunities, building infrastructure, and revitalization of culture were motivating community participation in ecotourism development. On the other hand, unfair sharing of benefits, HWC, shortage of trained personnel, and lack of coordination among stakeholder hindered community involvement in ecotourism development. For a better understanding of the opportunities and challenges of community participation in CBET development, further researcher should be conducted by considering the following factors. These are including marketing activity of CBET, safety and security issues, attitudes of the host community, displacement of resident from their land, exploitation of local workforce, leakage, environmental impact, availability of imperatives policy, development and expansion of CBET enterprises, and biodiversity resources.

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